

**Monthly meetings of RDP: documenting the situation in
ten village organizations in Matlab**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BRAC's Rural Development Programme (RDP) holds monthly meeting of the VOs and fortnightly meetings of the Essential Health Care (EHC) Programme as a part of organizational development for the poor. This study aimed to understand and document the process of these meetings. More specifically, the study aimed to find out i) whether the issue-based meetings and the health forum were organized regularly; ii) what were the issues discussed; iii) how these issues were selected; iv) attendance in the meeting; v) level of participation of the members; vi) the behaviour and attitude of the person who conducted the meeting; and finally vii) the mode of the meeting whether participatory or lecture type. Only ten VOs from Matlab-RDP were selected for the study, five for issue-based meeting and five for health forum. Group discussion was conducted with each VO to get information about these meetings during the last six months, informal meeting with RDP staff were held to know BRAC's rules and policy regarding these meetings. Participant observation was also made to see the process of the meetings.

Issue-based meetings or Gram Shava

Since February 1996, the issue-based meetings are called "Gram Shava", which means village meeting. It has been renamed and made flexible so that the members' husbands or any other male persons could participate. The issues to be discussed are normally selected from among the 17 promises. Sometimes the Regional PO selects the issue to be discussed. For instance, in January 1996, human rights was selected for discussion in each VO. Usually the PAs are responsible for scheduling the meetings for their respective VOs and they normally fix the date for Gram Shava a day before the weekly savings and credit meeting. At the beginning of this meeting, an Implementation Committee is formed to follow up whether the issues discussed are implemented or not.

It was found that in 7 of the 9 monthly meetings (sample from last six months), the issues related to savings and credit were raised which should have been covered by the weekly meetings. In some meetings cleanliness, hygiene, and latrine issues were discussed which should rather be discussed in the health forum. Monthly issue-based meetings were not held regularly in any VO during the preceding six months. Only five Gram Shavas (out of 15) were held in the five VOs. In April 1996, among 142 scheduled Gram Shava, only 85 were held in Matlab. In these meetings, the male-female ratio was 14:86. Among the 5 selected sample meetings, only 3 meetings were actually held and only 31% of the members attended without any male participation.

In most cases the PA conducted the meetings which were of lecture type. Moreover, the members did not think that it was their meeting. At the end of each meeting, the VO members were supposed to take decisions on the basis of the discussion. However, in most cases, the PA himself took the decision and asked the members of the Implementation Committee to read out. In Matlab RDP, all the PAs were male, and they did not seem to be very enthusiastic in conducting the meetings. They just did it as an

obligation. Because of the absence of male participation in the Gram Shava, they insisted the members to bring their husbands in the Gam Shava.

Only the leading people of the VOs participated in the meetings. The PAs did not receive any training on how to conduct issue-based meetings. Even no orientation was given on conducting Gram Shava. It is not worth conducting the issue-based meeting by the credit PAs for two main reasons: as the PAs remain busy collecting the weekly loan installments which takes long time, they return to the office late and usually do not want to go for the meeting. Moreover, since credit PAs conducts the meetings it is not possible to avoid the issue of financial matters.

Health forum

In Matlab RDP, two female health PAs were responsible for conducting the "health forum" bi-monthly in each VO in the presence of relevant shasthya shebika (SS) to raise health awareness of VO members. Non-members are also allowed to attend the health forum, since EHC services are provided to the whole community with SS as the focal point. The issues to be discussed in the health forum were selected at the refresher course in RDP regional office from the five elements of EHC. Each issue was selected for two months. More than one issue could be discussed in the meeting.

Like the issue-based meetings, the health forum was also not organized properly. Of the scheduled 15 meetings, only 5 were held. In most meetings, held during last six months, the main issues discussed in almost all meetings were latrine and tubewell. Vegetable cultivation was discussed in only one meeting. Most of the meetings were of lecture type. The PAs started discussing the issues when 20-25 women were present. The health PAs were female and they easily interacted with rural women. However, sometimes they became rude if the members were unable to talk about the issues discussed during the last six months or if they came late in the meeting. Some women did not seem to find the issues discussed in the health forum important. On an average, only 43% of the members were present in the five Health Fora observed. As women are generally busy during day time, they did not want to stay for long. Therefore, there was a continuous movement of members in and out of the meeting. Non-members were not present there.

In April 1996, according to RDP documents at Matlab, of the scheduled 38 meetings only 23 were held where 46% of the members were present. The main reason behind not holding all the Health Fora in April was that the PAs missed two days for refresher training, and they were also busy with the immunization programme. Moreover, the PAs and PO were busy in checking the inconsistencies between the reported number of latrines sold by the Area Office and the actual number found in the field through a recent study.

Recommendations for issue-based meetings or gram shava

1. RDP should recruit separate and especially female PAs for issue-based meetings or Gram Shava. They should be trained on how to conduct participatory meeting and instigate the members to initiate discussion. The PAs must have regular refresher training.
2. The meetings should be organized in such a way that the members can discuss issues amongst themselves even if the PA is absent. Participatory methods should be applied for organization development without which the group cohesiveness can not be expected.
3. The activities of the Implementation Committee should be followed-up effectively.
4. To ensure the quality of meeting and active participation of members, the frequency of meetings must be reduced.

Recommendations for health forum

1. To make the meeting manageable, the VO size should be reduced.
2. PA and POs could have discussion with VO members to find out the suitable timing for health forum which can increase attendance. VO members should be encouraged to select the main issue of the meeting
3. Health PAs should receive training on how to make health forum participatory.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is a very critical issue in the development field, especially in the third world countries. Therefore, for most non-government organizations (NGOs) women's empowerment is one of the key factors in development activities. One of the important aspects of the term empowerment is that it contains the word power, which can not be given. It has to come from within. Many NGOs have adopted different strategies for women's empowerment. Batliwala argues that women's empowerment programmes in South Asia fall into four broad categories: i) empowerment through integrated rural development programmes; ii) empowerment through economic interventions; iii) empowerment through awareness building and organizing women; and iv) empowerment through research, training and resource support (1). However, there is no clear cut design for empowerment.

There is a controversy among the development practitioners whether credit or conscientization has more potential to make women empowered. Some people believe that economic vulnerability is the main cause of their powerlessness, therefore, effective credit programme can make women powerful. On the other hand, raising awareness or consciousness is the first step leading towards empowerment. However, another belief is that, these two things should go together to accelerate the process of empowerment (2).

BRAC is the largest national NGO operating since 1972 with its two major goals of poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor with especial emphasis on women. Rural Development Programme (RDP) is the core of BRAC's development intervention. Rural development involves development of Village Organizations (VO) of the poor, credit disbursement, and facilitation of savings habit. The VOs are designed to mobilize collective strength of the poor to empowering them to be self-reliant (3). BRAC does not believe that women could be empowered either through awareness building or economic intervention alone, rather through integrated rural development programmes.

Institution development of the VOs is the core of all RDP activities. It is the base from which all other activities generate. All the developmental inputs are channeled to the members through VO. RDP believes that the poor remain poor because they are powerless both socially and economically. To address this issue RDP organizes landless individuals into village-based organizations.

BRAC also believes that better health for individuals and families as well as women's physical and social environment are essential for the empowerment of women. RDP provides Essential Health Care (EHC) to the poor. EHC aims to ensure provision of essential health care to BRAC's programme participants, combining improvement of their status with financial sustainability. There are five important elements in EHC, i.e. family planning, water and sanitation, immunization, health and nutrition education, and basic curative services.

For raising awareness among women about their own sociopolitical situation, different meetings are held at the VO level. Weekly VO meetings are held in the morning where savings deposit and loan repayment are normal activities. Some economic decisions are also taken in these meetings. Besides, monthly issue-based meeting is one of the approaches which help VOs develop as sustainable organizations. This meeting is also a regular forum which creates awareness of VO members about contemporary social, political and economic issues. Members try to identify specific and concrete issues which affect their day-to-day lives and act accordingly to protect their interests. Moreover, another important meeting is held at the VO level from health perspective which is termed as "Shasthya forum" i.e. health forum. This forum meets twice a month for disseminating health education on safe water, sanitation and hygiene practices.

The issue-based meetings are making women aware about the different aspects of their lives leading to empowerment, and should have an impact on the VOs. However, before studying the impact of these on VOs or on individuals it is important to document the process of issue-based meeting and health forum i.e., how these meetings are organized, how many members participate and what issues are discussed. This study aims to provide information on current status of these meetings and whether these have any impact on VO. This will help design the meetings more effectively.

Literature review

It was found in another RED study of 1991 that of the 200 meetings planned to be organized, only 55 meetings were actually held. In 8 VOs no meeting was conducted. About 56% of the meetings were lecture type; but discussions were allowed in the rest of the meetings. All the meetings were conducted by POs who also decided the issues to be discussed in these meetings. The VO members did not have much role to play in selecting the issues (4).

The main reasons for not conducting the meetings were that it was not a priority compared to credit, lack of sincerity of POs in holding issue-based meeting, lack of supervision by Area or Regional Managers, heavy work load on POs, frequent transfer of POs and flood (4). Moreover, an exploratory study done in Matlab in 1995 on 589 issue-based meeting and 327 health fora. This study showed that of the 589 issue-based meetings, savings credit and attendance were discussed in 40.6% of the meetings. Of the 327 health fora held during June-October 1995, the issue of safe water (tubewell) and hygienic latrine and slab latrine were discussed in 255 meetings. Rest of the meetings (75%) dealt with health and nutrition education (5).

Objectives

This study aimed to understand and document the process of monthly issue-based meetings. More specifically, the study aimed to find out i) whether the issue-based meetings and the health forum are organized regularly, ii) what were the issues discussed, iii) how these issues were selected; iv) attendance in the meeting; v) level of participation

of the members; vi) the behaviour and attitude of the person who conducted the meeting, and vii) the mode of the meeting whether participatory or lecture type.

METHODOLOGY

RDP has been operating in Matlab since 1992. At present there are 142 VOs in RDP-1 in Matlab. To document the process of issue-based meetings and health forum, only ten VOs were selected from RDP's schedule of monthly meeting, five for issue-based meeting and five for health forum. Information were collected through group discussion, informal meeting with RDP staff and participant observation .

A group discussion was conducted with each VO to get information about the monthly meetings during the last six months. We met the relevant RDP staff informally to know about BRAC rules about monthly meetings and health forum. We also observed different meetings.

It is important to mention here that, the VOs which were initially selected for group discussion and participant observation, meetings were often not held in some of those VOs. In such cases other VOs were selected. Apart from that, data collected for a exploratory study on issue-based meeting and health forum during May 1995-February 1996 and June- October 1995 respectively are also used in this paper as secondary data.

Limitations

Due to time constraints the sample size was small, only ten VOs were selected. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to generalize the results of this study.

ISSUE-BASED MEETING

BRAC rules regarding issue-based meeting

Each area office of BRAC is staffed by one area manager (AM), two programme organizers (POs), one accountant. One PO is responsible for VO development and credit operation who designated as PO (Credit management). S/he is assisted by 10 programme assistants (PAs). The other PO is responsible for sector programmes and designated as PO (EIG). S/he is assisted by 4-6 PAs. In Matlab RDP-1, both the POs were male and there were 12 credit PAs and 6 sectoral PAs.

As there are 142 VOs under Matlab RDP-1, each PA is responsible for 9-12 VOs on average. Each PA is responsible to conduct the issue-based meetings in his respective VOs. The issue-based meetings are supposed to be held once in a month which are scheduled by the respective PAs in advance. During 1993-94, the Organization Development PAs used to conduct the issue-based meetings. After 1994, the credit PAs started conducting these meetings. The issues relating to dowry, divorce, rights, cleanliness and other social issues which affect their day-to-day lives are discussed in these

monthly meetings. Issues related to financial transactions are not supposed to be discussed in these meetings.

Since February 1996, the issue-based meetings are called "Gram Shava," which means village meeting. To encourage participation of people from different socioeconomic classes and to make space for them, the rules of the monthly meeting were made flexible. Specially, the husbands of the members should be present in the meeting because sometimes they are not aware of what is going on. Sometimes they create problem while their wives get involved with BRAC. According to the female VO members the husbands have to understand everything otherwise there will be no change in their (members) lives. Therefore, in the Gram Shava, 90% members and 50% of the husbands are supposed to be present.

Apart from issue-based meetings or Gram Shava, another sort of meeting is often held at VO level which is termed as emergency meeting. This meeting, in fact, is held when any emergency arises such as default in savings and loan, conflict within the VO, or protecting the VO from the influence of any personal problem of any member. Emergency meetings are also called when the VO and its members are threatened by fundamentalism, religious superstition, group or social conflict.

In each issue-based meeting or Gram Shava, an implementation committee (IC) is made to follow up whether the issues discussed are implemented or not. The committee consists of a chairman, a secretary and a member. However, such committees are dormant and hardly follow-up the implementation of any issues.

Previously there was a provision of documentation of the monthly issue-based meetings at the area office. Each PA used to maintain register to note down the issues discussed in each meeting, the number of participants, the decisions taken, and the name of the members of the implementation committee. However, such documentation is not always maintained.

Selection of issues

Earlier, issues were normally selected from the 17 promises of VO members and only one issue was discussed in every meeting. But sometimes two/three issues are also discussed in one meeting. Sometimes the regional PO selects the issue to be discussed. For instance, in January 1996, human rights issue was selected for discussion in each VO.

Status of issue-based meeting during the last six months

According to the PAs, monthly issue-based meetings were not held regularly in any VO during the last six months (Table 1). In each VO on average, only one or two such meetings were held during the last six months. During the last two months only five Gram Shavas were held in the five VOs under study, which is 50% of the expected number.

Table 1. Number of meetings held during the last six months in selected VOs.

Name of the VOs	Number of meetings
Uddamdi Maddham	1
Shuvankardi	1
Dhighaldi	2
Dhakirgaon	0
Shilmondi	2

Selection of dates for issue-based meeting or Gram Shava

Usually the PAs are responsible for scheduling the meetings. They remind the VO members a week before (in weekly savings and credit meeting) about the meeting. The PAs mentioned that normally they fixed the date for Gram Shava day before the weekly savings and credit meeting to ensure full repayment in the next day.

How the meetings start

At the outset of the meeting, the PA calls the names of all the members according to the attendance register and ask them to read out the 17 promises. In some cases, this system is not followed if the PA is in bad mood or any thing happens in the VO on his arrival. For instance, in one such meeting when the members were coming, the PA asked why their guardians/husbands were not present there. The members replied that they were not informed about that. Then there was a misunderstanding between one member and the PA himself as the member was discussing something with her grandson. The PA became angry and later started the meeting without calling the names and getting the promises recited. The members are usually asked to sit in a circle for the monthly meeting.

Formation of the implementation committee

Usually after calling the names an implementation committee (IC) is formed. Interestingly, without deciding about the issue to be discussed, the PA asked the members who would be the members of the implementation committee. In most cases the members were not interested to become member of the IC as this means some additional work. Therefore, they tried to pressure one another to become the IC member. Different names were suggested by the members and finally the PA himself selected the members of IC.

The issues discussed

It was mentioned that the issues are normally selected either from the 17 promises or by the regional POs, and the issue related to saving and credit are not supposed to be discussed in the monthly meetings. However in practice, the PA as soon as he arrived in the meeting asked the members whether they had any problem. Naturally the members who had any queries regarding savings, loan, interest rate or insurance, started asking questions about those. So the whole meeting went on around the issues of savings and

credit, although the PA kept reminding them that these issues should not be discussed in this meeting. It was found that in 7 of the 9 monthly meetings monitored for this study, the issues of savings and credit were discussed.

Data collected from May 1995-February 1996 for a pilot study on issue-based meeting, show that of the 589 monthly issue-based meetings, issues on savings; credit and attendance were discussed in 40.6% of the meetings (Table 2). Once the discussion starts on financial transactions, it becomes difficult to discuss other issues. In one case, the mother-in-law of one of the VO members came to the monthly meeting and asked the PA why did he deduct extra money from her daughter-in-law while receiving loan from BRAC? It created confusion among other members and she was scolding her daughter-in-law in the meeting. It was a matter of only Tk. 5. While the PA failed to make them understand about the deduction, he wanted to pay back the amount from his own pocket, which the mother-in-law refused. Therefore, in this meeting no other issue could be discussed. Since that woman created problem in the meeting, many other members got angry and a pandemonium broke in the meeting. At the end, a decision was taken by the PA that if any conflict arose within the VO, the members themselves would solve that and the PA asked the chairperson of the implementation committee to declare it loudly to all present.

Table 2. Different issues discussed in the 589 issue-based meetings.

Issues discussed	Number of meetings held	Percentage
Savings & Credit	124	21.1
Attendance	115	19.5
Tree planting	57	9.7
Legal issues	40	6.8
Health issues	79	13.4
Related to VOs	145	24.6
Others	27	4.6
	2	0.3
Total	589	100

Source: Data collected for an exploratory study during May 95-February 96 as mentioned in methodology.

In some meetings the issues of cleanliness, hygiene, and latrine were discussed which should rather be discussed in health forum. While asked about what issues were discussed during the last six months, one member mentioned that the latrine issue was discussed. This was a issue for the health forum. A recent RED study poor follow up of the slab latrine sold by BRAC, particularly regarding its installation and use. As a sequel, almost in each monthly meeting latrine was a main issue for discussion.

At the end of each meeting the VO members are supposed to take decisions on the basis of the discussion. However, in most cases, the PA himself took decision and asked the members of the IC to read out the decision and follow-up that decision until the next meeting.

Facilitation of the meeting

The issue-based meeting is considered a members meeting. The PA mentioned it for several times in the meeting that "it is your meeting, you should tell me what do you want to discuss, and in this meeting I am only a listener." The PAs wish to play the role of a facilitator. However, in most cases the PA conducted the meeting and the meetings were mostly of lecture type. The issues other than financial transactions were mainly raised by the PAs themselves as decided earlier. So, initially the PA spoke on the issue and then the questions if any, were asked by only few members especially who were in the leading positions in the VOs. These people used to sit in the front row and when the PA asked any question, he addressed such members.

When the members were asked about the issue-based meeting, they answered, "Brothers and sisters come to advice us and we come to listen to them." It was observed that the monthly meetings were mostly of lecture type and they did not think that it was their meeting.

Decisions taken in the meeting

At the end of the discussion the members were supposed to take a decision and to follow it up through the IC. But, in most cases, the PA himself took the decision and asked the members to read out. Though it was dictated by the PA what the IC would do regarding the follow up of the issue, but in practice no follow-up was done after the meeting. The PAs also admitted the fact.

Status of the gram shava

As mentioned before, according to new rules, 90% of the female members and 50% of the husbands should be present in the Gram Shava. In reality we observed few males (two or three) to be present in the meeting. The members were found neither acquainted with the idea of Gram Shava nor very excited about the issue-based meeting. It seems that they did not understand the difference between the issue-based meeting and Gram Shava. The PAs mentioned that not all the members were told about the Gram Shava and they did not tell them the difference between these two. The PAs had informed the members that the issue-based meetings were currently known as Gram Shava and that the males or husbands could be present in the meeting. But this information was poorly disseminated. The members were not found aware of any other male participation in the meetings.

Table 3. Status of Gram Shava in April 1996.

PAs	Number of VOs assigned to each PA	Number of meetings held	Total members of the VOs where Gram Shava held	Number attended		
				Members	Males	Total
A	14	10	380	338	11	349
B	11	8	392	234	44	278
C	12	8	343	240	27	267
D	12	5	181	123	27	150
E	11	11	538	398	108	506
F	12	6	264	171	28	199
G	12	7	337	213	44	257
H	12	6	239	195	19	214
I	10	7	259	180	34	214
J	11	6	216	183	15	198
K	13	6	217	162	9	171
L	12	5	205	121	62	183
Total 12	142	85	3,571	2558 (85.67%)	428 (14.33%)	2,986

Source: Matlab RDP-1 Social Development Programme.

As it was difficult to observe all the meetings supposed to be held in April due to the short time frame of the study, we tried to find out how many meetings were held in Matlab during April from local RDP office. RDP Social Development Document shows that of 142 Gram Shavas only 85 or 60% were held (Table 3). Of the total members 72% attended these meetings. Of those attended 85.7 % were members and 14.3% were males.

It is important to note here that the figures of Table 3 may be upwardly biased as it was observed that even when a meeting was not held properly, that was also documented in the RDP office. In the five meetings observed as part of this study only 31% of the females and no male were present (Table 4).

Behaviour and attitude of the PAs towards VO members

In Matlab RDP all the PAs were male. These PAs did not seem to be very enthusiastic in conducting the meetings, they just did it as an obligation. Discussion was not held in a friendly manner. Sometimes the voice of the PAs was rude when there was low presence or lack of order.

Table 4. Status of five sample VOs according to holding of meeting and attendance.

VOs	Whether monthly meeting held	Total members	Number attended*
A	Y	37	12 (32%)
B	N	62	-
C	N	47	-
D	Y	31	25 (80%)
E	Y	52	35 (63%)
Total		229	72 (31%)

Y=yes, N=no

* those attended were members.

Perception of PAs about issue-based meeting or gram shava

The PAs were not very much aware as to why these meetings were held. They thought that these meetings were held to solve the problem within the VOs, to make the members aware/conscious and for VO sustainability. They also mentioned that monthly meetings were held to accelerate the weekly meetings. According to them, the presence of male in the Gram Shava was very negligible. Males did not come to the meeting. However, to ensure the presence of male in the meeting they insisted that the members bring their husbands. Sometimes they even threatened the members that loan would not be given if they did not bring their husbands. This happened because there was pressure on the PAs from the higher management to ensure the presence of the male in the Gram Shava. Even these could not ensure the presence of males in the meetings we observed.

Regarding the presence of male/husbands in the meeting the PAs mentioned that those who were busy with their work did not have time to attend the meeting. If any male ever comes to the meeting he comes for his own interest. For instance, if a woman needs loan or if there is any problem then the husband comes to the meeting to talk with the PA. According to the PAs there were two main reasons for male attendance in the meeting; i) to make friendship with PO/PAs, so that their wives could easily get loans in future, and ii) to create chaos and problem in the meeting (by individuals opposed to BRAC and the VO).

Though the issues regarding savings and credit are not supposed to be discussed in the monthly meeting, however, the PAs mentioned that it was difficult to adhere to it. They said, "The members want to discuss financial matters whenever they see us. It is not worth conducting the issue-based meeting by the credit PAs. This problem will remain as long as the credit PAs conduct those meetings." According to the PAs, women are not interested in these meetings, they want to get direct benefits. At the same time the members mentioned that "Money is everything and we need money, so in these meetings we discuss the issues related to savings and credit."

HEALTH FORUM

BRAC procedure about health forum

BRAC's Essential Health Care (EHC) programme operates under the RDP to bring about changes in the health of rural people. This programme targets the basic needs of the rural poor through five major components; i) family planning; ii) water and sanitation; iii) immunization; iv) health and nutrition education; and v) basic curative services. The EHC intervention is very simple, cost effective and easy to manage through RDP's organizational framework. A voluntary health worker known as Shasthya Shebika (SS) is the nucleus of the EHC programme. Since SS is selected from among the VO members from the community she serves, she is acceptable and easily accessible. Health Forum meeting of the VO members is conducted bi-monthly to disseminate various preventive health messages.

In Matlab RDP, there were two female health PAs working under one regional health PO (female) based in Chandpur. These PAs were responsible for conducting the "health forum" bi-monthly in each VO in the presence of relevant SS to raise health awareness of VO members. The SS must be present in the meeting, and thereby develop the capacity to conduct the meeting in the absence of PA. Initially, the health meeting was supposed to be held with the weekly savings and credit meeting. But experience showed that the system did not work; after paying the savings and credit installments the members were no longer found interested to stay for attending the health meeting. Therefore, the provision for conducting the health forum separately has been instituted since 1995. Now, every morning each health PA conducts two health fora in two VOs. The regional PO also attends the forum while visiting a particular area. According to the procedure, at least 20-25 members must be present in the meeting otherwise it would not be called a health forum.

Non-members are also encouraged to attend the health forum, since EHC services are provided to the whole community with VO as the base. A file or register is maintained at the area office where the PAs document the date, the issues discussed and number of attendance. In each area there is a set target for holding health forum and selling latrines and tubewells every month. The Matlab RDP is supposed to sell 100 latrines and 20 tubewells every month. Therefore, along with conducting the meeting, the PAs have to mobilize people to achieve EHC's targets, being supervised and monitored by regional PO.

The PAs prepare a monthly schedule of health forum for their respective areas which they try to follow. The PAs remind the respective VO members about the date and time of the health forum a day before the meeting. The meetings usually last for 45-90 minutes.

All the PAs received 15 days training on EHC at TARC. Moreover, the PAs who are in service for about 1-2 years also received training of trainers (TOT) for 7 days. Besides,

every month there is a one-day refresher course at RDP regional office. The SSs are trained by the PAs and PO at the area office.

Selection of issues

The issues to be discussed in health forum are selected at the refresher course at RDP regional office. The issues are mainly selected from the five elements of EHC. Each issue is selected for two months. For example, as the PO mentioned, April was the season for cultivating summer vegetable, therefore they decided to discuss about the nutrition and vegetable cultivation for the next two months.

Status of health forum during the preceding six months

The health forum is supposed to be held in every two months in each VO. As such, 3 meetings should have been held in each sample VO during the preceding six months of the study. But, like the issue-based meetings, the health forum also were not held properly. Table 5 shows that only one-third of the meetings were held. In most meetings, held during the last six months, the main issues discussed were latrine and tubewell. Vegetable cultivation was discussed in only one meeting.

Table 5. Number of health forum held during the preceding six months of the study.

Code of the VO	Number of meetings expected held	Number of meetings actually held
M	3	1
N	3	2
P	3	None
Q	3	None
R	3	2
Total	15	5

Issues discussed

Discussions on latrine, tubewell, sanitation, vegetable seeds and vegetable cultivation were held in the five VOs during the last six months. Almost the same issues were discussed in other meetings we observed outside of these 5 VOs. While discussing the issue of vegetable seeds and cultivation, the health PA elaborated the advantages of eating vegetables for its nutritional value. Similarly, she discussed about the advantages of using sanitary latrine and drinking safe water. In each meeting attempt was also made to find out how many were interested to install latrine and tubewell.

The findings of a RED pilot study on the 327 health fora held during June-October 1995 showed that the issues of safe water (tubewell) and hygienic latrine and slab latrine were

discussed in 25% of the meetings. Rest of the meetings (75%) dealt with the issues of health and nutrition education.

Facilitation of the health forum and participation of the women

Most of the meetings were of lecture type. The PAs started discussing the issues when 20-25 women were gathered. The health PAs were female and their behaviour was good. But sometimes they became rude if the members were unable to talk about issues discussed during the last meeting or if they came too late in the meeting. This incident specially happened when we asked the members about the previous meeting. Sometimes people could not remember the issues discussed in the meetings held during the last six months. Some women did not seem to find the issues discussed in the health forum important or relevant. One such comment was:

"You asked us to eat green vegetables cooked with oil and also to eat iodized salt. But we cannot afford oil, and iodized salt. If we can not afford it then what is the point of remembering what you discussed in the meeting?"

Women were not found to be very enthusiastic about health forum and on an average 45% of the VO members were present in those meetings (Table 6). One woman mentioned,

"Everyday there are meetings in the morning and evening. Our husbands will no longer tolerate that."

Table 6. Participation of women in health forum.

Name of the VO	Total number of members	Members attended No. (%)
M	70	22 (31)
N	45	20 (44)
P	45	24 (53)
Q	51	14 (27)
R	58	35 (60)
Total	269	115 (43)

In some meetings it was found that women were called to the meeting by the SSs or others. Women came in the meeting with their work in hand; for example, a woman came with a bowl of clothes she was washing. As women are generally busy during day time, they did not want to stay for long. Therefore, there was a continuous movement of members in and out of the meeting which again made the PAs angry. A few people participated in the discussion who were again in the leading position in the VO, including the SS.

Status of health forum during April 1996

The health fora were going well. Both the PAs regularly conducted the meetings. In every meeting a decision was taken regarding latrine and tubewell, i.e. how many would be interested in installing latrine and tubewell as EHC has to fulfill their set target. Therefore, sometimes the PAs became more busy in achieving the target rather than concentrating on meeting. The PAs and PO were more busy in checking the inconsistencies between the reported number of latrines sold by the area office and the number actually found in the field through a recent study. In April, out of 38 scheduled health forum only 23 were held in which an average of 46% women were present. Though non-members were also allowed in health forum, however, their attendance were not found in the health forum register (Table 7).

Table 7. Status of health forum during April 1996.

PAs	Number of VO for each PA	Number of meetings held	Total Members of the VOs where health forum held	Members attended	
				No.	(%)
1	20	14	681	311	(45)
2	18	09	456	214	(47)
Total	38	23	1,137	525	(46)

Source: Health forum register, Matlab RDP.

DISCUSSION

Does issue-based meeting or gram shava lead to sustainability?

In RDP phase IV proposal it is expected that as a result of the VO development activities, VOs will emerge as sustainable organizations according to the criteria developed. Eleven criteria have been developed so far for VO sustainability where the sixth criteria is about "How often the issue-based meetings are held, whether issues of member's day-to-day concerns are discussed and whether the male members attend these to be aware of these and to know what their women are involved in" (5). Sustainability of VOs largely depends on how it grows to take responsibilities. Apart from the economic and social profitability of the Income Generating Activities, the other important aspect is how VOs are developed as social institutions. VOs should act as a cohesive group and the issue-based meeting is another important factor for developing VO into social institution thus make it sustainable. In such case, the quality of meeting is also more important than the number of meetings.

In the study villages, however, women themselves never initiated any meeting if the PA was absent or they never met together with their own interest. Moreover, the women

themselves did not select the issue rather one or two issues were pre-selected and a sort of lecture was given by the PA on those issues. There was hardly any discussion.

In most cases the meetings were not held regularly although a schedule was prepared for every month by each PA for their respective VOs. The main reason for this was that the credit PAs went out in each morning for weekly savings and credit meetings. If they returned late in the office and thought that they would be further late reaching the village, they did not go for meeting. Sometimes the PAs did not inform the VO about the meeting beforehand, as a result no meeting could be held. The PAs also mentioned that they called the issue-based meeting if there was any problem regarding loan repayment in any particular VO. This is consistent with an earlier statement by the PAs that the issue-based meeting is called to accelerate the weekly meeting.

Only few people participated in the meeting, and those were mainly the leading people in the VO, so the meeting was not very popular. To facilitate the meeting in a participatory way needs skill which the PAs lack. They even did not receive any training on how to conduct the issue-based meetings. There was only one-day workshop run by the RDP with all these credit PAs in November 1995. Even no orientation was given on how to conduct Gram Shava.

Since the meetings were not held regularly and interesting issues were not discussed, most members could not remember the issues discussed earlier and even the dates of last meeting. Most members were not sure about the relevance of the meetings. They came to the meeting because they wanted to justify their eligibility to get future loans. One woman mentioned,

"You ask to plant trees and cultivate vegetables but most of us do not have any land to do so. Therefore what is the point of remembering all these?"

The women were not found as a cohesive group, set up and manage their own services if necessary as these are the indicators of empowerment as argued by Batliwala (1). For instance, in one meeting it was found that the owner of the premises where the meeting was going on needed a latrine as her latrine was used by all the members. That was the premise for weekly and monthly meeting. Since the woman was a widow, the PA proposed to the VO members that they could pay Tk. 5 each for installing a latrine. Immediately the cashier of the VO objected to the proposal and tried to convince other members for not paying the money. They were not ready to spend a little money for the sake of the VO. This small incidence shows lack of group cohesiveness.

Over the next few years, RDP will put more emphasis on the quality of its work particularly in social development activities. It will concentrate on "programme deepening" instead of "scaling up". Number of staff conducting issue-based meetings has been increased from two POs to 10 PAs per area office. These PAs, along with their credit

and savings related responsibility, will conduct these meetings (1). Here lies the problem. It is quite difficult for the credit PAs to conduct issue-based meetings as they are already busy with credit which is their main focus. Therefore, being the credit PA it is impossible to avoid the issue of savings and credit to be discussed in those meetings. Moreover, the PAs are also not found to be enthusiastic in conducting the meeting.

However, if RDP decides to assign PAs for issue-based meetings or Gram Shava, separate female PAs may be assigned for conducting these meetings. It is observed from the health forum that female PAs were probably more effective in conducting the health forum.

In the Gram Shava men are supposed to be included, which is a positive step from gender perspective. While talking about men's gender-interests, White argues that to transform the existing gender relations of domination, we also need to work with men. To operationalize that, intervention must be context-specific which is a crucial aspect while working from gender perspective. It was observed in this study that the VO members were not clearly informed why their husbands should be present in the meeting and at the same time men were also not directly informed about that. Moreover, the time for monthly meeting is fixed in the afternoon as women can make some free time then.

But, men are not free at that time. Moreover, they will also have to know why they should attend the meeting. Fixing the meeting time without consulting them and expecting the men to be present in the meeting would be unrealistic.

Finally, as it is mentioned before, the quality of meeting is no less important than the number of meetings held. In this study women were found less interested to attend too many meetings held at the VO level. Therefore, it should be considered whether 12 meetings in a year are at all necessary.

Issue-based meeting or Gram Shava could be a good opportunity and might have much potentials to make the VOs sustainable as well as have impact on women's empowerment. However, to do so the meetings should be organized in a participatory way. The members should have the opportunity to select the issues and initiate the discussion, and to some extent solve their problems on their own. To develop VOs into sustainable organizations by creating awareness through these monthly meeting, it could design the Gram Shava under social development programme separate from credit operation.

Ensuring hygiene practice through health forum

Health care is one of the most important needs of the rural poor, particularly women. BRAC is providing basic health care for many years. The EHC programme targets several basic needs of the rural population, such as access to safe water and sanitation, contraceptives, immunization, vitamin A capsules, and other health services. In addition, the programme also educates members on preventive hygiene practices. Participants are

given health advice on sanitation and hygienic practices (5). In RDP phase IV, the SSs will be trained for 20 days to enhance their skill.

Health forum, held bi-monthly in each VO, is conducted by the PAs in the presence of SSs. To make this health forum sustainable in the absence of PAs the presence of SS is mandatory. In study villages, the health forum were held more regularly during April 1996 in the VOs and SSs were also present. However, in the same VOs during the last six months only 33% of the health fora. were held. Some of the scheduled meetings could not be held during the last six months due to political unrest, natural disasters and programmatic reasons.

RDP has reduced the size of the village organization from 45-55 members to 35-40 members. So that a PA can better manage the VO meetings and can give more attention to individual member. According to the RDP policy, the health forum can be held as long as there are 20-25 members present. Now, what will happen to the other women who were absent? It is not possible under the existing RDP policy to disseminate health education individually. Moreover, in reality the size of a VO varies from 27-70 members (Table 6). Therefore, in case of larger VOs, it would be unrealistic to expect that all the members will be present in the meeting and the PA would to effectively conduct the meeting.

Most meetings are of lecture type. Only few women, especially the SS and the members of the management committee participate in the discussion. Health forum is apparently a good forum for raising health awareness. Therefore, without being more target oriented, health forum should be organized in a more participatory manner. It should be kept in mind that a meeting does not mean giving lecture, rather it should be a discussion among the members. If the issues are raised from member's own experience, then the discussion would be more participatory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for issue-based meeting or gram shava

1. RDP should recruit separate PAs for issue-based meetings or gram shava. More specifically, to make these meetings culturally sensitive, female PAs should be recruited and designated as Organization Development PA for mobilizing people and conducting the issue-based meetings or Gram Shava and not dealing with savings and credit.
2. The organization development PAs should be trained on how to conduct participatory meeting and instigate the members to initiate discussion. The PAs must have regular refreshers training.

3. Participatory methods should be applied for organization development without which the group cohesiveness can not be expected. At the same time the members should have the opportunity to select the issues themselves.
4. The meeting should be organized in such a way that the members can discuss issues amongst themselves even if the PA is not present.
5. The follow-up of the activities of the implementation committee should be made strong.
6. To ensure the quality of meeting and active participation of the members, the frequency of the meetings must be reconsidered. Instead of doing it monthly, it could be organized bi-monthly.

Recommendations for health forum

1. Though the size of the VO has been reduced in principle, but it is not fully implemented at the grassroots level. To make the meeting manageable, the VO size should be reduced in practice.
2. PA and POs could discuss with VO members to fix a suitable time for health forum which could increase the attendance.
3. Health PAs should receive training on how to make health forum participatory. VO members should be encouraged to select issues for the meeting; after this is discussed, the PAs may raise their own issues (if any).

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