

# Engaging Elite Support for the Poorest?

BRAC's Experience  
with the Ultra Poor Programme

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	v
Abstract	1
Introduction	2
The specially targeted ultra poor programme	3
Engaging village elite	6
Impact	8
Understanding elite support for the poorest: factors underlying GSC effectiveness	11
Conclusion	15
References	16

## FOREWORD

Over a quarter of Bangladesh's people live in extreme poverty, not being able to meet even the barest of the basic needs. They spend most of their meagre, unreliable earnings on food and yet fail to fulfil the minimum calorie intake needed to stave off malnutrition. They are consequently in frequent poor health causing further drain on their meagre resources due to loss of income and health expenses. More often than not, the extreme poor are invisible even in their own communities, living on other peoples' land, having no one to speak up for them or assist them in ensuring their rights. Extreme poverty also has a clear gendered face – they are mostly women who are dispossessed widows, and abandoned.

The extreme poor are thus caught in a vicious trap and the story of denial and injustices tend to continue over generations for a large majority of them. Thus, a vast majority of the extreme poor in Bangladesh are chronically so. The constraints they face in escaping extreme poverty are interlocked in ways that are different from those who are moderately poor. This challenges us to rethink our existing development strategies and interventions for the extreme poor, and come up with better ones that work for them. This is the challenge that drove BRAC to initiate an experimental programme since 2002 called, 'Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction: Targeting the Ultra Poor' programme. The idea to address the constraints that they face in asset building, in improving their health, in educating their children, in getting their voices heard, in a comprehensive manner so that they too can aspire, plan, and inch their way out of poverty.

The extreme poor have not only been bypassed by most development programmes, but also by mainstream development research. We need to know much more about their lives, struggles, and lived experiences. We need to understand better why such extreme poverty persists for so many of them for so long, often over generations. Without such knowledge, we cannot stand by their side and help in their struggles to overcome their state.

I am pleased that BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division has taken up the challenge of beginning to address some of these development knowledge gaps through serious research and reflection. In order to share the findings from research on extreme poverty, the 'CFPR/TUP Research Working Paper Series' has been initiated. This is being funded by CIDA through the 'BRAC-Aga Khan Foundation Canada Learning Partnership for CFPR/TUP' project. I thank CIDA and AKFC for supporting the dissemination of our research on extreme poverty.

I hope this working paper series will benefit development academics, researchers, and practitioners in not only gaining more knowledge but also in inspiring actions against extreme poverty in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

**Fazle Hasan Abed**  
Chairperson, BRAC

## **Engaging Elite Support for the Poorest? BRAC's Experience with the Ultra Poor Programme**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes and draws lessons from the experience of engaging village elite in support of the ultra poor through the Gram Shahayak Committees (GSC), as part of BRAC's CFPR/TUP programme. The paper addresses the following questions: under what conditions can elite become engaged in support of interventions for the ultra poor? What are the risks and benefits of engaging elite in antipoverty programmes? After describing the origins and motivations behind BRAC's Specially Targeted Ultra Poor (TUP) programme, the paper goes on to explain how an important lesson from the programme as it evolved included the need for on-site, village-based protection and support for TUP participants and their newly-acquired assets. The paper goes on to explore some of the early impacts of the GSCs which were formed to fill this need, and to assess the motivations and factors underlying their effectiveness and success. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the lessons from the experience, including their implications for assumptions that dominate scholarship and programmes relating to the rural politics of poverty in Bangladesh.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes and draws preliminary lessons from the experience of engaging village elite in support of a programme for ultra poor women in rural Bangladesh. It addresses the following questions: under what conditions can elite become engaged in support of interventions for the ultra poor? What are the risks and benefits of engaging elite in antipoverty programmes?

In the next section the paper outlines the origins, aims and operation of BRAC's Specially Targeted Ultra Poor programme (TUP programme). It then goes on to explain the decision to experiment with engaging village elite support through Gram Shahayak Committees (GSC; Village Assistance Committees). The following section looks at the impact of these Committees on the programme and the ultra poor. The next section attempts to explain the factors underlying this impact, including exploring elite motivations for involvement. The last section draws some

conclusions and lessons from the experience, exploring some vital assumptions that dominate scholarship and programmes relating to the politics of poverty in its extreme forms in rural Bangladesh.

This paper is based on a series of field research activities undertaken by the Research and Evaluation Division, including a survey of 160 GSCs during April-May 2004; interviews and focus group discussions with TUP members and GSC members in three northern districts and with field and head office staff between January and June 2004; and process documentation research into the TUP targeting and selection processes (in 2002) and on the formation of GSCs (2003).<sup>1</sup> The paper also draws on programme activity data collected by local area offices and on research and other assessment work undertaken by external consultants and researchers (cited where relevant).

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<sup>1</sup>This includes field research and research in progress by Mamun-ur-Rashid and Md. Hasanur Rahman of RED.

## THE SPECIALLY TARGETED ULTRA POOR PROGRAMME

### Extreme poverty in Bangladesh

Depending on methods used, recent estimates suggest that as much as 20 to 34% of the population of Bangladesh lives in extreme poverty (Table 1). This is a significant number of people requiring immediate and special attention, if Bangladesh is to fulfil its commitment towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) which underpins its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP).

Focusing policy attention towards the extreme poor is important because their existing opportunities can be severely constrained due to mismatches between the structure of opportunities available and the complex structure of constraints they face. For instance, it is by now accepted that mainstream development approaches, especially microfinance, largely bypass the extreme poor. However, evidence also suggests that microfinance has provided an important opportunity for moderate poor households to overcome poverty and reduce vulnerability (Khandker 1998, Morduch 1998). Market-mediated opportunities may also bypass the extreme poor because they lack the human and social capital needed to participate and benefit from such opportunities, and/or because they live in areas or belong to ethnicities that are bypassed or excluded due to their lack of voice and representation in policy-making processes.

On all the expected dimensions – land ownership, food security, health and nutrition, educational status – the ultra poor fare substantially worse than the rural national

average.<sup>2</sup> A particularly important challenge to improving the livelihoods of the ultra poor is their low initial stocks of social capital. Dimensions of poverty in Bangladesh generally include ‘poverty in people’, but in this respect the ultra poor are poorer than the average, while 8% of rural households are headed by women, fully 40% of ultra poor households as targeted by BRAC are women-headed households. Again, while only 2% of rural households are households of one person, as many as 12% of the ultra poor are single member households.

Incorporation into valued social networks tends to come, for the poor, at the high price of exploitative yet reasonably secure forms of dependency (Wood 2000, 2003). A defining characteristic of the ultra poor is their inability to even achieve ‘adverse incorporation’ into relations of dependency, relations which may at least ensure security, although at a cost (Wood 2000). In BRAC’s own experience, social networks to protect ultra poor participants were initially so weak as to entail risks to the programme itself, as distributed assets were at risk of damage or theft from within the community.

<sup>2</sup> Baseline data indicate, for example, that 48% of BRAC-targeted ultra poor households cannot afford two meals a day as compared to 8% of the national rural average, and a mere 20% of targeted ultra poor households have a literate member as compared to 58% of the national rural average.

**Table 1. Progress in poverty reduction: poverty and extreme poverty compared**

Variables	HIES 2000			HIES 1995-96		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
Less than 2122 kcal/person/day	44%	42%	53%	48%	47%	50%
Less than 1805 kcal/person/day	20%	19%	25%	25%	25%	27%
Upper poverty line head count (CBN method)	50%	53%	37%	53%	57%	35%
Lower poverty line head count (CBN method)	34%	37%	19%	34%	39%	14%

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2003)

### The origins of TUP: reaching down to the poorest

In January 2002, BRAC started a new programme for the extreme poor called Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction/Targeting the Ultra Poor (CFPR/TUP) programme. A historical perspective on BRAC's development programmes helps to explain its current engagement with the extreme poor. BRAC has been concerned with developing programmes for the extreme poor since its beginnings in 1972. Its foundational work began with addressing the immediate needs of the refugees who returned home after the Bangladesh freedom struggle of 1971. Gradually, BRAC moved beyond relief work to building sustainable livelihoods of the poor with a particular focus on women through an incrementally wide range of development programmes in the areas of microfinance, sector programmes, education, health, nutrition, and social development. The concern with the extreme poor in BRAC's microfinance programme, for instance, can be seen in its official definition of eligibility. In addition to the standard 'less than 50 decimals of owned cultivable land' criterion used by most microfinance institutions, BRAC also uses 'household selling at least 100 days of manual labour' as an official expression of its commitment to include the very poor.

However, BRAC came to realise that microfinance alone is not as suitable an entry point and intervention for the extreme poor as it is for the moderate poor. Severe malnutri-

tion and hunger typically characterizes the situation of the extreme poor, and without immediate attention to addressing these constraints, microfinance would fail them. Yet, mere food aid provides short term relief without building any foundations for sustainable change. This was the driving motivation for BRAC in approaching the World Food Programme (WFP) in 1985 to pilot a 'laddered strategic linkage' approach that would transform WFP's feeding programme for the extreme poor then called Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme (VGF) into the nationwide Income Generation for Vulnerable Group Development (IGVGD) programme.<sup>3</sup> The basic idea was to leverage the two-year food aid period supported by WFP through appropriate income generation and social development training, develop a regular savings habit, provide small amounts of micro-credit and offer the opportunity of eventual inclusion into BRAC's mainstream development programmes through membership of its village organisations.

What started off as a BRAC pilot to bring the extreme poor within the fold of its microfinance and other development programmes is today a nationwide programme working with over 1.2 million extreme poor and vulnerable women in 268 *upazilas*.<sup>4</sup> Almost 70% of the women who join BRAC's

<sup>3</sup> For reviews of the IGVGD programme, see, Hashemi (2001); Matin and Hulme (2003); Matin and Yasmin (2004).

<sup>4</sup> The lowest administrative unit of the government of Bangladesh. There are 507 *upazilas* (BBS 2002).



VOs through the IGVGD programme manage to continue as active microfinance members. However, those who do not continue as stable microfinance members are also among the poorest and the most vulnerable (Webb et al. 2001). Moreover, many extreme poor women also lack the social networks necessary to obtain Vulnerable Group Development membership, which is decided by local government representatives at the *Union Parishad* level (Matin and Hulme 2003).

The IGVGD experiences of BRAC were central to the development of the new programme for the extreme poor. The basic idea of a staged/laddered strategic linkage is also used in the new CFPR/TUP programme. However, the approach is more systematic, intensive, and comprehensive, covering economic, social, and health aspects. The main components of the CFPR/TUP programme are summarized in Table 2.

The aim of the CFPR/TUP programme is to build a more sustainable livelihood for

the extreme poor: a solid economic, social and human foundation which would allow them to overcome extreme poverty in a sustainable manner.

It is too early to comment on the long-term success of the TUP programme. However, independent reviews done in 2003 and 2004 both concluded that the programme had shown good results. A 2004 review concluded that the programme had a) produced solid results in terms of enabling extremely poor women to improve their livelihoods; b) had done so relatively cost effectively; and c) to the extent that such comparisons are meaningful, was comparatively more effective at improving the livelihoods of extremely poor women in rural Bangladesh (Posgate et al. 2004). The programme aims to reach 70,000 ultra poor women in the poorest districts of the country by 2006. By 2004, the programme operated in 14 districts with 20,000 ultra poor women.

**Table 2. The CFPR/TUP programme components and their purpose**

Component	Purpose
Integrated targeting methodologies	Effective targeting of the extreme poor
Income generating asset transfer	Build economic asset base
Income generation training and regular refreshers	Ensure good return from asset transferred
Technical follow-up of enterprise operations	Ensure good return from asset transferred
Provision of all support inputs for the enterprise	Ensure good return from asset transferred
Monthly stipends	Reduce the opportunity cost of asset operations
Health support	Reduce costly morbidity
Social development	Knowledge and awareness of rights and justice
Mobilization of local elite for support	Create an enabling environment

## ENGAGING VILLAGE ELITE

Given that an important dimension of extreme poverty in rural Bangladesh is weak social networks or social capital, the original programme design envisaged a process of building the social support networks of TUP participants through a strategy of 'pushing out', or building links and support networks with other groups and organisations. These were to include existing BRAC village organizations of micro-credit borrowers, who tended to include poor, but rarely ultra poor women members. Local government officials were also to be encouraged to take an interest in the programme through a targeted advocacy and communications strategy designed to highlight its achievements in addressing the most severe and chronic forms of poverty. That is, social capital was to be built both through stronger horizontal networks, among the poor, but also through vertical links to official structures.

Early on in the process of distributing assets to TUP participants, however, BRAC staff recognised that the programme was likely to face a number of problems (BRAC, 2002). One was that some participants began to appeal directly to BRAC staff for assistance and advice, sometimes travelling long distances to do so. In effect, participants began to treat BRAC staff as patrons. A second was that assets given to these extremely poor women appeared to be at risk from theft or damage, including from some community members who were jealous of the programme beneficiaries. In the initial stages of asset distribution in some villages, there were instances when BRAC microfinance

group members displayed their resentment against TUP participants whom they felt were receiving gifts from BRAC, while they, as conscientious BRAC loan group members, had received nothing free. In the early stages at least, it was not clear that TUP participants were likely to gain strong support from BRAC microfinance group members, many of whom had tended to exclude the ultra poor from membership of their groups. Lacking any strong social support from the poor within the community, then, ultra poor women were unlikely to be in a position to protect their newly gained assets.

The need for an intervention which could provide TUP participants with enduring, day-to-day, on-site support was clear. With their experience and knowledge gained over two decades working with poor rural women in micro-credit programmes, BRAC Programmes staff recognised that, despite the limited scope of customary sources of social support, the programme should avoid undermining or replacing these altogether. Undermining older, village-based practices of assistance to the poor would be an undesirable side-effect of the programme because it would reduce the range of potential sources of support available to these groups. But a more practical concern was the need to ensure that such assistance was available at close reach, within the local community. Not being community members or residents, BRAC staff would not have been in a position to provide all the support and protection needed by ultra poor households, even if this had been an objective of the programme.

Against this background of an innovative pilot programme evolving to tackle problems as they emerged, programme management proved responsive to the concerns and views of field staff. The decision was taken to engage village elite in the programme. The aims of this intervention with village elite were to maintain or even strengthen customary systems of social support for the poorest, while also providing some more systematic, community-level protection against the social and environmental risks characteristically faced by the rural ultra poor.

The decision highlights the significance for the design and implementation of rural antipoverty programmes of two coexisting yet somewhat contradictory working 'theories' of the relationship between village elite and the poor. The first derives from the hard lessons of BRAC and other organizations from the 1970s, when efforts to achieve poverty reduction through communitywide programmes resulted in elite capture of benefits, in some cases leading to tighter control by the village rich over the poor. Studies such as those by BRAC (1983), Hartmann and Boyce (1983) and Arens and Van Beurden (1980) used class theoretic and Marxist-inspired analyses of rural Bangladeshi life to highlight how entrenched structures and practices, including the vicious cycle of impoverishment which resulted from money-lending practices, enabled the landed village rich to oppress the increasingly landless village poor. The chief programmatic lesson of this scholarly thinking about rural Bangladeshi society is that efforts to tackle poverty should seek to organize and target the poor separately from the rest of the community, and to do so in ways that sought to break the control of village elite over the poor.

The second working theory BRAC staff bring to field operations, however, is the

more homely recognition that in practice, poor people depend to some degree on the patronage, protection, and/or charity of village elite. With their considerable knowledge and experience of working within rural communities, BRAC staff are aware of the important role played by village elite in the lives of the rural poor. A calculation of the risks and benefits from engaging village elite in a guided intervention resulted in the belief that the ultra poor programme, and the TUP participants, would on balance benefit from the engagement of village elite.

Verbal directives from head office guided the establishment of Gram Shahayak Committees or GSCs (Village Assistance Committees). These volunteer committees were to include seven members, including the BRAC staff member responsible for social development activities in the area, a representative from among the TUP participants, and where possible, two representatives from another organization from the BRAC family, that of the *Palli samaj*, which is a ward level federation of village level BRAC VOs. The remaining members (between three and six) were to be drawn from among respected members of the local community, through a process of guided selection. Process documentation research indicates that GSC formation involved the transmission of messages about the traditional responsibilities of village elite with respect to the poor, through a brief series of interactions and village-level discussions organized by BRAC staff. GSCs are mandated to protect TUP participants in crisis; help resolve their problems, including ensuring health services, food, advice and protection; provide them with sanitary latrines, clean water and house repairs; and ensure school-aged children of TUP participants are enrolled in school.

## IMPACT

Each village in which the TUP programme operates is expected to form a GSC, through the advocacy, motivational and organizational efforts of BRAC staff members responsible for social development activities within the CFPR programme. There is considerable variation in the degree of activity among GSCs, but an aggregate picture of their contribution towards improving the livelihoods of the ultra poor can be gained from figures reported from the local area offices, gathered from the BRAC staff members who are members of the GSCs.

**Table 3. GSC activities report (cumulative figures from January 2002 to July 2004)**

Number of GSCs formed	1,013
Fund mobilized (in USD)	36,160
Number of tubewells installed	457
Number of latrines installed	1,001
Number of houses repaired	1,424
Number of ultra poor supported for medical treatment	1,926
Number of children from ultra poor household enrolled in schools	2,102
Number of ultra poor child births registered	3,697

While this aggregate report includes data from newly established GSCs, and can be supplemented by other information sources such as a survey of 160 older GSCs (those established in 2002) undertaken by the Research and Evaluation Division in 2004. While there are considerable variations in the degree of activity among the more established GSCs the survey indicates that on average, GSCs established for more than two years had

to date mobilised resources in cash and kind amounting to over Tk. 6000, repaired or built five houses in each village, installed four sanitary latrines and two tubewells for the use of TUP members, and had spent more than Tk. 200 on each TUP member for medical treatment (Matin 2004).

Some of the more important impacts of the GSCs are the most difficult to observe. These include the protection – whether latent or active – afforded by public knowledge within the community that members of the local elite were overseeing and protecting the participants and their assets. The difficulty in gauging the actual impact of the GSCs in this respect is that all villages in which the TUP programme is in operation have also established GSCs. These are to a greater and lesser degree active in supporting the TUP participants. However, the process of forming the committees ensures communitywide knowledge that members of the local elite are involved in the programme. This knowledge significantly reduces the risks that assets, in particular, will be damaged or stolen. Where TUP members' assets have been damaged or threatened, GSC members have taken direct action, in some cases by calling *shalish*, or traditional dispute resolution 'courts' to resolve the problem.

Even less tangible consequences of the presence of GSCs are that they appear to bestow a degree of local legitimacy and ownership on the programme. Interviews and discussions with GSC members reveal some pride in the achievements of these ultra poor

women, whose living conditions and prospects were so poor previously that they were routinely written off as beyond help. It is perhaps because GSCs mobilize community resources that there is a sense of the programme as a local success, rather than merely as the intervention of an external organization. The local legitimacy of the programme also appears to derive substantially from the careful process of targeting and selection, in which community participation in mapping and wealth ranking processes was vital to the accuracy of the final selection of participants (Matin and Halder 2002, BRAC/RED 2004).

The GSCs also appear to have contributed to qualitative changes in the lives of the ultra poor. Positive impacts include the widening of their social networks, and reported improvements in the extent of their inclusion within the village community social life. Some TUP participants report being invited to festivals and weddings from which they had previously been excluded: 'now they call us to eat'. The significance of such inclusion within Bangladeshi village society is that may also entail access to charitable gifts and forms of protection associated with religious duties.

In some cases, the responsibility of GSC members to ensure TUP women receive healthcare entails accompanying them to health facilities beyond the immediate village area: for some these accompanied visits are an introduction to the world beyond their homes. TUP representatives on the GSCs are also exposed to the highly male sphere of village-level decision-makers through their regular contact with the important and respected local persons who constitute their fellow committee members. While it is undoubtedly the case that the most confident among the TUP participants are selected for this role in the first place, these women tend to be consi-

derably more outspoken, articulate and capable than could be expected given their extremely poor rural backgrounds. In a discussion with one GSC, we were told that the eloquent TUP member on the Committee 'had not been able to speak before', reflecting the reality that poor rural women in Bangladesh are rarely heard and routinely silenced, particularly in public spaces.

Inclusion within village society helped by the engagement of village elite also brings with it, however, greater reliance on patronage by ultra poor women. Evidence suggests that the TUP participants who benefit most from the activities of the new Committees are those who had the best social relations with GSC members before the TUP programme started, and who were most likely to have had some support in the past. GSC members themselves explain their activities as in line with, or as an extension of 'traditional' social welfare activities, which in most cases also means as the activities associated with rural patronage. While there is the risk that GSCs may merely harden pre-existing structures of dependency, GSCs represent a departure from old-style patronage in key respects. Their activities extend beyond those of traditional patrons in both style and substance. We see, for example, that ultra poor women who previously had no chance of gaining access to local government resources (warm clothes in the cold weather, relief goods) are now better-placed to secure such statutory 'rights'. Ultra poor women are also able to conduct their livelihood activities with a greater sense of security, knowing that their assets are at least nominally protected by powerful village elite. In these respects, GSC activities move beyond the acts of a patron to act as a kind of corrective against the features of bad governance at the village which most afflict the poorest.

In addition, more among the ultra poor benefit from the protection of GSCs than was previously the case, including those previously excluded from patron-client relationships. As was noted above, a defining feature of extreme poverty in Bangladesh is exclusion from the net of patronage: the destitute are by definition too poor or too marginal to be valuable clients. To some degree, engaging village elite in support of the TUP programme is a means of garnering some of the basic benefits of elite protection for the TUP participants. These may be the extra benefits of charity or patronage and may involve new or renewed dependence on patrons, but they are as often nothing more than the chance to build livelihoods in an environment which would otherwise be and has previously been hostile to such attempts.

There are slight but definite suggestions that the more active Committees may also have wider positive consequences for the village poor and for local institutions. In the 2004 survey of 160 GSCs, 75% reported having discussed helping other poor people in their village, and 43% reported having helped other poor people, suggesting that at least some GSCs are beginning to extend their remit, or to view their responsibilities as extending beyond the immediate programme aims. But some are clearly more successful and active than others, and in a classic

example of success-breeding-success, survey data analysis shows that those GSCs that raise more resources and from a greater diversity of sources are also more likely to expand their remit to cover other poor people (Matin 2004). The conditions underlying effective GSCs will be looked at more closely below. But it is worth pointing out that the GSC provides a village community-level focal point and institutional basis for mobilizing resources and organizing support activities exclusively for the village poor. This provides an institutional focus on the poor which may otherwise be lacking.

One final village-wide impact which is of interest is the use of GSCs as a vehicle to promote awareness of the need for sanitation facilities for the poor. One clear incentive for GSCs to support the poorest was created by BRAC staff explaining how all – and not just the poor – are affected by the diseases associated with the lack of sanitary facilities among the poor. This appears to have been new information for many village leaders, and to have helped galvanise them into providing sanitary latrines for the poorest. Similar experiences with advocacy among village elites are also reported by Kar (2003) through the Village Education Resource Centre (VERC) approach to total sanitation in other parts of Bangladesh.

## UNDERSTANDING ELITE SUPPORT FOR THE POOREST: FACTORS UNDERLYING GSC EFFECTIVENESS

### Elite motivations

It is worth reiterating that GSCs are committees of volunteers who receive not even token remuneration, and whose activities are rarely publicized beyond the village community. Their modest but concrete achievements, not least the vital support in the form of the 'enabling environment' (as one Programme Manager put it) they provide the programme with, have also been leveraged. More importantly, this has been achieved with little additional resources from BRAC, other than the part-time organizational efforts of staff responsible for social development aspects of the programme. An understanding of the motivations of village elite for supporting the programme and of the factors underlying the effectiveness of GSCs will be of interest to researchers, NGO staff and activists seeking to work with the poor, and in particular to those attempting to work with the even more challenging group of the ultra poor.

It is not obvious why village elite in Bangladesh may support antipoverty interventions, as the common assumption is that the rich oppose efforts to reduce poverty because they benefit from its persistence. For this reason it is worth looking first at how village elite might be adversely affected by the programme.

Field research and independent review work suggest that there are indeed village elite who believe their material or status interests have been adversely affected by the

TUP programme. In many TUP programme sites, the view has been expressed by TUP participants, other villagers and indeed even the local rich, that the programme had reduced the availability of cheap labour. In one village, wages for day labourers are reported to have risen. In another, a TUP participant reportedly declined a request to work in a wealthy household on the grounds that her labour was now worth far more than before the programme (Posgate et al. 2004).

However, material interests are not always fixed and may compete against other interests. So when the village rich complain that they find it difficult to get cheap labour, they also know that this means a reduction in the burden of charity they are legitimately expected to bear. The availability of cheap labour is always seen as an economic resource for rich households, yet it may also be a cost: rich women frequently claim to give poor women 'work' as a form of assistance to destitute neighbours, when they could in fact manage well enough themselves. Such 'work' (from one point of view) and 'help' (from the other) is the substance of rich-poor relations at village level. It involves far more than a relationship between employee and employer, as it is the primary exchange involved in the rural dependency relationship on which the poorest depend – in those cases in which they are fortunate enough to have a patron. Significantly, some TUP members still occasionally work in their former employers' houses, highlighting the importance of other, non-wage benefits from the patronage relation-

ship. In any case, it seems that at least some village elite have accommodated themselves to this aspect of the programme, recognising that the costs are balanced against some village-wide benefits, as initial uncertainty about the programme tends to dissolve after some time. A study of elite attitudes towards the ultra poor also suggests they are likely to support interventions of this kind, to the extent that they do not foster dependence, but enable the ultra poor to build their own livelihoods through hard work (Chowdhury et al. 2003).

One motivation for elite involvement in the TUP programme derives from the overlap between wealth, influence and the requirements of local social and political leadership. In the rural Bangladeshi moral economy, leadership is defined by the willingness to make provision for the poorest, particularly during crises (Greenough 1983). Village elite involved in GSCs frequently stress the continuities between those activities and charitable acts they customarily perform for the poorest. Given that village leadership depends on the demonstrated capacity and willingness of leaders to provide for the poor, to the extent that GSCs provide a channel through which they can fill that remit, they are a welcome addition to the apparatus of village leadership. The significance of helping the poor as a defining feature of local leadership is affirmed by the willingness of local politicians to volunteer for GSC membership, despite BRAC's official preference for and staff efforts to exclude them. This is mainly on grounds that local politicians have little time for additional voluntary activities, but also due to the fear that these village committees may be reduced to party political patronage, or become a source of corruption.

Process documentation research into GSC formation reveals, however, that BRAC staff cannot impose their preferences on the

community - as indeed is appropriate. In addition, village elite characteristically display a high degree of overlap between wealth, high social status, and local official and informal leadership, such that it is more than likely that those in a position to provide the support services required by the GSC membership will also be involved in other committees activities. The GSC survey revealed that 34% of GSCs had members currently holding local government office, while in 53%, members had at some time held office (Matin 2004). Fully 82% of all GSCs had members who were also involved in other local committees, such as the mosque, market/bazaar or school management committees. This suggests that GSC membership fits within local notions of appropriate behaviour for village social and political leaders.

The value-added of establishing a committee to undertake what are widely seen as customary social welfare activities (even if these are honoured more in the breach) is that the GSC format institutionalizes and gives a structure to what already goes on, or is supposed to go on. Some village elite feel that the burden of assisting the poor falls more heavily on themselves than on others; this is particularly true where there is a high proportion of village elite who are absentee or part-time residents. The GSC enables a more systematic and more transparent means of pressurizing others among the village elite to pay their share of support to the village poor. It also makes it possible for GSC members to claim resources from local government, local committees, and from other NGOs. With respect to the provision of sanitation facilities, it seems clear that these required collective, rather than individual action. Simply institutionalizing and formalizing actions required under local moral economy norms appears to have had some impact on the willingness of village elite to act.



A final motivation for elite engagement is that the programme presents no obvious threat to elite. While the programme itself tackles extreme poverty, it does not obviously challenge the substance of rich-poor relations, nor, indeed, of gender relations. That the rich do not suffer from the programme is affirmed in the language used and meaning assigned to the activities of the GSC. BRAC field staff and GSC members explain their activities in ways that link closely into understandings of the traditional and religious duties and customary practices of support for the poorest incumbent upon the village rich. The process of establishing GSCs similarly appeals to the benevolence and munificence of the 'respected' and 'bountiful' elite, while prejudices against the involvement of women in public decision-making and committee activities are similarly honoured, to the detriment of both poor and elite women's involvement in GSC activities.<sup>5</sup>

### Local ownership

The second factor underlying the effectiveness of GSCs appears to be the ways in which they help foster a sense of local ownership of the programme process and of the GSC itself. The importance of GSCs being rooted within and responsive to the local community – in particular the poor – is highlighted by a number of interesting characteristics of successful/active GSCs. For example, the more active and/or more successful Committees are also those that are more likely to have poor women among their membership. The survey found that 22% of GSCs did not have TUP members (despite BRAC head office directives) and that only 10% had representatives from the *Palli samaj* (primarily because these are not present in all locations). Those with *Palli samaj* members were more successful at

raising cash resources, while those with TUP members were more likely to extend their remit to others among the poor. In addition, GSCs in which the elite members have salaried or other jobs which take them outside of the village appear to be somewhat less effective at raising resources, presumably a reflection of their greater detachment from village life. Similarly, although the analysis did not show this to be significant, GSCs in which a high proportion of members had previously held local government office or sat on other local committees appeared to be less successful at mobilizing resources for the GSC; this may be because to do so competed with their other resource-mobilising activities, or because they are too busy to devote much time to the Committee. On the other hand, however, the degree of 'eliteness' of the membership of the GSC does not necessarily detract from its effectiveness, as those where higher education was more common were also more likely to expand their remit to other poor people within the community.

On balance, the most effective Committees appear to be those in which the benefits of powerful elite membership are married with genuine responsiveness and some kind of accountability to the poor. One way of viewing this is to see the more effective GSCs as examples of successful coalitions linking the interests of the poor to those of elite. As one long-term observer of Bangladeshi rural politics observes:

The point for a pro-poor agenda ... is not to displace elite, for they will always be there and will always (except on occasion in the short term) get the greater share of benefits. Rather, the objective is to obtain significant benefits for non-elite on a continuing basis and to steer as much as possible of that benefit stream to the poor (Blair 2003).

<sup>5</sup> This aspect of GSC formation was revealed in process documentation research by Mamun-ur-Rashid and Md. Hasanur Rahman of RED.

Blair acknowledges the need for the poor to ally tactically and as necessary with the non-poor and elite on agendas with potentially wide benefits, on the grounds that if it is true that elite continue to dominate rural affairs 'it will be difficult – and in all likelihood impossible – to cobble together a constituency large and powerful enough to realize the pro-poor agenda on any exclusive basis' (ibid. 13). The BRAC experiment with GSCs could thus be seen as an example of an intervention that creates social capital by building pro-poor coalitions through the agency of an external actor (Harriss 2001).

### **The BRAC factor**

The third and final factor underlying BRAC's success in engaging village elite support appears to be related to the prestige involved with connections to BRAC. As the largest NGO in the country, BRAC has an image and

status among rural people unrivalled by other NGOs and possibly by other private sector organisations. In addition to its microfinance programmes, which reach more than 3.5 million borrowers, BRAC has schools, clinics and related social services, as well as marketing vital producer and consumer goods such as seeds and fresh milk. That BRAC is a large, well-networked, powerful organization is clear to rural people, including the village elite. The GSC intervention thus connects village elite to a large-scale development programme which has to date brought tangible benefits to at least some of the community. While we do not as yet know precisely how BRAC is viewed, it seems likely that village elite view connections with BRAC as an investment with potential future pay-offs. There is evidently some prestige to be derived from, as one GSC member explained it, 'helping BRAC to help the poor'.

## CONCLUSION

BRAC's attempt to engage village elite in support of the poorest evolved in response to perceived threats to the programme's success, emanating from the extreme vulnerability of programme participants themselves. The modest success, to date, of the GSC experiment highlights gaps in our knowledge of how to work with both elite groups. There are no templates for such engagement, and BRAC's TUP programme has relied on responding to needs as they emerge through a combination of experiment, knowledge of local conditions, and ongoing action-oriented research (some of which this paper is based on).

The experience with the TUP programme has also highlighted gaps in our knowledge about the ultra poor, whose characteristically extreme vulnerability renders standard antipoverty programme redundant. In the TUP programme, one emergent concern is that improved livelihoods for the ultra poor may come at the cost of increasing dependence on patrons. To some extent this may be the unavoidable consequence of the intrinsic character of extreme poverty in rural

Bangladesh, which involves substantial exclusion from patronage relationships. As the ultra poor move up into the ranks of the merely poor, or better still, the non-poor, they will necessarily rely on an increasingly wide circle of social networks and relationship which are vital to the sustainability of rural livelihoods. Drawing on some parts of those networks and relationships will inevitably involve becoming more embedded in patronage relationships. The dynamics of dependency, autonomy and progress out of ultra poverty is an area which merits further research.

BRAC's experiment with engaging village elites also raises questions about the dominant wisdom with respect to the politics of rural antipoverty programmes. While there are concerns about the longer-term consequences of what has proven to be a necessary engagement with village elite, in the short- to medium-term, the pay-offs appear to have been worth the effort. Through careful coalition-building based on advocacy and a good understanding of local social practices, it appears to be possible to engage village elite in support of the poorest.

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