

# ARTICLES

## Interactions Between Field Workers and their Clients and Superiors in Non-Governmental Organisations

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This article deals with the interaction between the field workers and their clients and between field workers and their immediate superiors. This discussion is important for three main reasons. Firstly, it is important to know how field workers interact with their clients and their immediate superiors. Secondly, from a 'development' point of view, it is important to see how policies and decisions are filtered down from the top to the field workers and how field workers pass them on to their clients. Thirdly, it is very important for the NGO management to know how or whether the problems or opinions of the clients are taken into consideration in the short- or long-term planning of the NGOs.

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### INTRODUCTION

I wanted to see what clients think about their field workers and what field workers think about their clients. I also wanted to explore what field workers thought about their immediate superiors and what their immediate superiors thought about their subordinates, that is, the field workers. With what type of clients do field workers prefer to work with? What were the type of field workers that the clients liked? In case of field worker-superior interaction, I sought to explore the preferences of the field workers and superiors with regard to each other. I also wanted to explore the perceptions of the clients with regard to the services of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The article will discuss what clients want that field workers cannot give, as well as the achievements and failures of the field workers. These are important

aspects of the interactions between the two because a major role of the field workers is service delivery.

Field work for this study was conducted between September 1998 and May 1999. The methods of inquiry of my study were predominantly ethnographic and/or qualitative with limited quantitative work. These included in-depth case studies, structured discussions with selected field workers, managers of NGOs, clients, as well as documentary search. One hundred and nine field workers were interviewed by a questionnaire to get basic information. This information was analysed by using stata software. Every effort was made to collect NGO statements and documents with respect to their policies for recruitment, promotion, posting, training, and other aspects related to their field level personnel, as well as their policies regarding leave, pension and other fringe benefits for field workers. The documents, which field workers used in reporting or recording their activities, were also collected and analysed. This gave me an idea of their load of paper-work. I verified with the workers whether these policies are implemented or not.

## **THE STUDY NGOS**

1. MCC International first came to Bangladesh to assist the survivors of the great tidal bore disaster of 1970, centred at Noakhali, south-east of Dhaka. Now there are three main foci in the MCC programmes in Bangladesh: agricultural and family development, employment creation, and emergency assistance. MCC Bangladesh has 141 full-time staff and about 10 thousand members. I worked in Noakhali.
2. Proshika is one of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh. Since its inception in 1976, Proshika's efforts have centred around engendering a participatory process of 'development'. It claims to have succeeded in pioneering an approach that puts human development at the centre. Proshika works in 10,166 villages and 654 urban slums, with nearly 1.3 million men and women from rural and urban poor households, organised into 68,897 groups. This translates into a total programme reach of over 7.1 million individuals (Proshika, 1997). I worked at Sakhipur, central Bangladesh.
3. Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) is one of the oldest NGOs of Bangladesh Working in northern Bangladesh, with around 2,00,000 households, the RDRS has an employee

strength of about 1,500. Originally a branch of an international NGO, Lutheran World Federation, it became a national NGO in 1997 (RDRS, 1997). I worked in the Kurigram district, north-western Bangladesh.

Save the Children (SCF), UK, is one of the leading international NGOs of Bangladesh. It started its work in Bangladesh soon after its independence in 1971. One of the major activities of SCF (UK) is to enable its beneficiaries to cope with floods, a major natural disaster in Bangladesh. SCF (UK) has Coping with Flood programmes in some flood-prone districts in Bangladesh. In Shariatpur, SCF (UK) decided in 1996 to hand over its activities and resources to local NGOs due to high operating costs. Twenty-two former SCF (UK) field workers formed three new NGOs and are working as 'partners' of SCF (UK). The 'partner' NGOs have around 1,800 members. Their work is now all in micro-credit, despite SCF (UK)'s published preference for emphasis on social problems in Bangladesh.

## **THE CLIENT/FIELD WORKER INTERFACE**

Jackson (1997) emphasises on the cooperation between the field workers and their clients and the necessity to have an amicable relationship. This makes the work of the NGO easier and service delivery improves. Throughout my field work, I tried to see and know how clients and field workers interacted. In most cases, field workers tried to order their clients to get their work done. This problem has been exacerbated by the recent emphasis on micro-credit. In many cases, to recover the loans, field workers abuse their clients.

From my observation and discussion with clients, I can grade the NGOs according to their field worker-client relationship. When clients were asked about their relationship with field workers, 80 per cent Proshika clients reported it to be very good. Sixty-eight per cent SCF (UK), 65 per cent MCC clients, and only 52 per cent RDRS clients termed their relationship with their field workers as very good.

I would put Proshika at the top, and suggest that the main reason for this good relationship is that until recently Proshika was a different type of NGO, more interested in the motivation and organisation of the landless. Now, though Proshika has joined the fashion for micro-credit and its training, some of its work still leave room for greater interaction between field workers and clients. By 'some of its work', I refer to the distinctive nature of Proshika's work in motivating its clients for local and national political issues. Proshika still

runs non-formal and adult literacy schools and seeks to increase motivation through an emphasis on national pride. I found Proshika field workers to be required to observe national days; this is counted in their staff evaluation. I found that all field workers and trainee clients, led by Area Coordinator, place a wreath at the Language Martyrs' Memorial at midnight on February 20. Very few NGOs in Bangladesh give such importance to observing national days. In the 1980s, Proshika was engaged in motivating its clients to demand state land and water bodies for the landless. Many of today's senior managers of Proshika were trade union leaders or activists of the left or centrist political parties before joining Proshika. In my experience, leftist political or cultural workers are good motivators. Many senior and mid-level managers of Proshika lamented to me that as the NGO moved away from this motivation, the amicable relationship between the field workers and clients was gradually disappearing.

After Proshika, the clients of the SCF (UK) 'partners' seem to have good relations with their field workers. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the clients deal with their field workers with respect and keep in mind the influence of their families. Secondly, the kinship relation between clients and field workers is also a decisive factor. Clients told me that they liked their field workers because they were from their own or neighbouring villages. One client told me of a field worker, 'She is our girl. How good or bad she is, is of secondary importance'. Thirdly, as I mentioned earlier, that SCF (UK) started work in Naria as a relief agency and many people in that area gratefully acknowledge the benefits they received then. There is a dark side to this too. Here again, micro-credit programmes have cases led to bitterness between the field workers and clients in many cases.

In the relationship between clients and field workers, I would put the MCC in the third place. Firstly, the missionary nature of the NGO and its activities is a major reason. All the clients described the MCC field workers as well-behaved and punctual. As a policy, MCC puts high importance on the punctuality and behaviour of its field workers. Secondly, a major advantage of the MCC field workers over most other NGOs is the low priority given to micro-credit and a different way of working with it. So, they are removed from the bitterness of working in this area. At the same time, the low priority of micro-credit is also a disadvantage. Many MCC field workers told me that clients wanted micro-credit and in some cases have left the MCC for

credit-giving NGOs. The MCC field workers cannot give as much micro-credit as their clients demanded.

Among the four study NGOs, I found the worst relationship between clients and field workers in RDRS. This NGO may organise picnics and sports tournaments for its staff, but it clearly had problems in the micro-credit programme. Besides, the RDRS has failed to reorient itself successfully from a relief agency to a 'development' agency. Clients do not like to accept that they must now repay RDRS for services rendered. Also, a paucity of skilled field workers in many areas has resulted in poor service delivery by the RDRS.

Apart from the issues discussed above, I found that clients wanted field workers to be polite, cooperative and sympathetic to their problems. All women clients preferred to work with women field workers (despite class differences) and the reasons are quite obvious. In many cases, clients wanted something from their field workers which may be very important but not obvious to outsiders. For example, women clients generally wanted the field workers to be modestly dressed, and, particularly in areas where the MCC was working, for them to maintain purdah. Similarly, all clients (whether men or women) wanted the male field workers to respect the elders of their community and the purdah of their women.

## **MOTIVATION OF FIELD WORKERS**

There are certain things which motivate field workers to work better. These include policies of the NGOs, how they are implemented, team work among the field workers, and their superiors. All these affect the field worker-superior relationship and the motivation of field workers to work. These are enumerated in Table 1, which highlights how NGOs should deal with their field workers and keep them motivated.

To study the assessment of the motivation of the field workers, a five-point scale was constructed. The index values were equivalent to the scale values. The index values ranged from -2, meaning not at all satisfactory, to +2 meaning good facilities are available, which included staff policies, salary and benefits, and so on. On this scale, the MCC staff were most motivated followed by Proshika, SCF (UK), and RDRS. Similarly, a five-point scale was created to assess the level of job satisfaction, with the results being similar to that for motivation. If we see how NGOs can satisfy needs at different levels of Maslow's hierarchy (Morgan, 1997: 37), it is clear that NGOs do not

feel it important to meet the needs due to the absence of job security and prevalence of patronage in those organisations (see Table 2).

TABLE 1: Motivation of Field Workers

	<i>MCC</i>	<i>PRO-SHIKA</i>	<i>RDRS</i>	<i>SCF(UK)</i>
<b>Code of Practice (positive)</b>				
Promotion policy and its implementation	Poorly accepted	Moderately accepted	Poorly accepted	Not applicable
Transfer policy and its implementation	Poorly accepted	Moderately accepted	Poorly accepted	Not applicable
<b>Code of Practice (negative)</b>				
Grounds for job loss	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Not applicable
Penalties	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Not applicable
Show cause notices	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Not applicable
Criticism by superiors	Depends on case •	Depends on case	Depends on case	Depends on case
Head office visits	Accepted	Accepted	Accepted	Accepted
<b>Team Spirit</b>				
Social events	Absent	Highly accepted	Accepted	Highly accepted
National days	Absent	Highly accepted	Accepted	Absent
<b>Personal</b>				
Help in emergencies	Accepted	Accepted	Moderately accepted	Accepted
Leave	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted	Poorly accepted

*Source:* Field Survey.

**TABLE 2: How NGOs Satisfy Needs at Different Levels on Maslow's Hierarchy**

<i>Type of Need</i>	<i>Satisfaction</i>
<b>Self-actualising</b>	
Encouragement of complete employee commitment	
Job as a major expressive dimension of employee's life	Absent
<b>Ego</b>	
Creation of jobs with scope for achievement, autonomy, responsibility and personal control	Absent
Work enhancing personal identity	Limited
Feedback and recognition for good performance (for example, promotions, 'employee of the month award')	Absent
<b>Social</b>	
Work organisation that permits interaction with colleagues	Present
Social and sports facilities	Present(except SCF, UK)
Office parties and outings	Present(except SCF, UK)
<b>Security</b>	
Pension and health care plans	Absent
Job tenure	Absent
Emphasis on career paths within the organisation	Absent (except Proshika)
<b>Physiological</b>	
Salaries and wages	Present
Safe and pleasant working conditions	Absent

*Source:* Field Work; Morgan (1997).

## **CLIENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE SERVICES OF THEIR NGOS**

The NGOs like MCC, RDRS or SCF (UK) started relief work after natural hazards and initially worked as relief agencies. Clients still perceived the services of their NGOs as free. In a culture of relief, it is

a problem in doing 'development' or developing self-reliance, and the field workers blamed the NGOs for this poor planning.

Training is one of the major service provided by the NGOs to their clients. The main complaints from the clients on training were poor timing as well as some irrelevant training. Besides, due to the loss of wages for the days or even weeks of the training, clients are unwilling to attend training programmes. Regarding poor timing for conducting training programmes, all the clients (both men and women) said that there were times of the year when they could not afford to be away from their work, for example, during the sowing and harvesting seasons. The clients said that this problem could be overcome by simply asking them (the clients) for the best time to conduct training programmes.

Some of the training programmes were very popular with the clients because they were useful, for example, home gardens, record-keeping, poultry rearing, and so on. On the other hand, the clients also reported that some training programmes were not useful and were a complete waste of time.

When I asked clients what they had learned from a training undertaken six months or even a year ago, many could respond. Except for the SCF (UK) 'partner' NGOs, all the study NGOs had regular training programmes for their clients. The SCF (UK) arranged for visits to other NGOs, but this was for the field workers and Directors of its 'partner' NGOs. MCC and Proshika clients got transport and food allowances and accommodation for training programmes, which seemed to compensate adequately for their absence from work if the timing was convenient. The RDRS clients had to pay Taka 25 for a three-day training programme and Taka 50 for a training programme lasting more than three days. All clients disliked this system and gave me the examples of other NGOs. The RDRS clients told me that they could not afford these training fees, and leave paid work or work in their farms or homes, especially when they found it difficult to repay their loans. Many RDRS clients told me that, very often, they were forced by the field workers to go for training programmes. They also complained about the poor quality of food in the training centres. The RDRS field workers said that if their clients did not go for training in large numbers, their district or head office demanded to know the reason. So, they were sometimes pressurised to force their clients undertake training.

A major complaint that clients had about their field workers was their the lack of punctuality of some. Sometimes field workers came late to group meetings, which annoyed many clients who had left paid work or domestic responsibilities to attend the same. Though I found field workers to be sometimes late for unavoidable reasons, in other cases I found them to be not serious about the value of their clients' time. Sometimes, even mid-level managers would be late for meetings, leaving their field workers to face the criticism of their aggrieved clients.

I would like to close this section with a discussion on the opinions of the clients about the services they need from their NGOs, in order of priority. The suggestions require the due attention from the policy makers of NGOs in Bangladesh.

### *Unity*

All clients wanted advice and supervision from their field workers on how to maintain unity in their groups. This seems like a good suggestion because NGOs should work to make their client groups self-sustaining as unity among the clients is essential. Most clients told me that members do not join the groups with the same objective and so it becomes difficult to maintain group unity when some people join the groups only to fulfil their petty interests.

### *Credit*

During my interaction with clients, all of them told me that to make a living everybody needed money or to be more precise, a regular income. The clients said that credit should be given due importance as a service for them.

### *Education*

All clients reported that they wanted non-formal and adult literacy services from their NGOs. They also said that after completion of these educational programmes, there should be separate programmes to retain what they have learnt; otherwise they would forget reading and writing, which would then be a waste of time and resources.

### *Skill Training*

Most clients (both men and women) gave high importance to skill training. They said that to become self-employed or to use credit efficiently, they needed to be skilled in their trades. So, clients needed skill training for income-generation activities.

*Gender Awareness Programme*

All the women clients and even most of the men reported that the gender programme of the NGOs could not be successful without legal awareness programmes on the rights of women, the necessity of girls' education, and awareness against the evils of child marriage and dowry. These, they say, are not only necessary for women but for men as well.

*Health-Education*

All clients reported that they needed health education programmes like cleanliness, basic health awareness, the necessity of using latrines and supplying them at subsidised prices, sinking tube-wells and making clients aware of the necessity of using safe drinking water, and so on.

**FIELD WORKERS' OPINIONS OF THEIR CLIENTS**

So, with what type of clients do the field workers want to work with? Overall, they tended to prefer women, the not-so-poor, the educated and the obedient. Women are clearly more obedient than men as I shall discuss below. My findings are similar to those of Rahman (1999) on Grameen Bank. Table 3 shows the field workers' preferences for clients. The gender variation in selecting clients by the field workers does not seem unusual. Clearly, all women field workers would like to work with women clients. Interestingly, most men (63 per cent) field workers wanted to work with women clients and 26 per cent wanted to work with both men and women.

**TABLE 3: Field Worker's Preferences for Clients**

NGO	Both	Women	Men	Total
MCC	19(65)	13 (190)	10(0)	42 (39)
Proshika	8(28)	8(12)	0	16(15)
RDRS	2(7)	33 (48)	1(10)	36 (33)
SCF (UK) 'Partners'	0	15 (22)	0	15(14)
Total	29 (100)	69 (100)	11 (100)	109 (100)

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are per cent of total. Percentages are rounded so they may not sum up to 100.

*Source:* Field Survey.

To elaborate on why women clients are more preferred to men clients, the field workers' reasons<sup>2</sup> are given below.

1. Same gender (for women field workers only).
2. Women are always available.

3. Men create problems in repaying loans, women are better. Men are more ingenious and difficult to control.
4. Women are committed to repaying loans, utilise loans properly, and usually do not waste money.
5. Women try to be self-reliant.
6. Women attend meetings regularly.
7. Easy to work with women.
8. Women are more united than men and groups do not break up.
9. Women are good savers.
10. Women are obedient.
11. The women who know that their husbands will misuse the money do not take loans.
12. Women do not have the courage to flee the village.

The reasons listed above gives rise to several questions. An important question that strikes me is that not a single field worker (male or female) reported that they preferred to work with women because they needed 'development' or needed to be empowered, perhaps reflecting a mentality which puts their own convenience first. This also raises questions on the quality of training of the field workers.

My findings also confirm the findings of Goetz (1995, 1996, 1997) and Goetz and Gupta (1994), which questions the quality of the GAD programmes of NGOs and government organisations where women are used as a means to provide credit to a family. In a personal communication with Gupta in 1999, she said, 'If NGOs want to give credit to men they should give it directly to men. Why are they using women as a medium? The way NGOs give emphasis to credit programmes targeting women seems, in most cases, to be a channel to give money to men. Kabeer (1998) differs with Gupta and seems to be a supporter of the present system.

The preference of field workers and mid-level managers for women clients can be elaborated by an example. In Kurigram Sadar Thana, the RDRS had around 4,000 members of whom 2,600 were women and the remaining men. The Thana Manager of Kurigram Sadar told me (in 1998) that he had directed his field workers not enrol any more men clients and to only enrol women. He even told me that if men clients left the RDRS to join other NGOs, the field workers should allow them to leave, but try to keep retain the women clients.

The field workers' preference for not-so-poor, educated clients could be linked to the micro-credit programmes of the NGOs. Even in MCC, which does not work so much in micro-credit, the field workers told me that for agricultural work clients needed some land. Many MCC field workers expressed their concern for the landless people who could not be reached by their NGO. Here I would like to say that it is convenient for the field workers to work in micro-credit with the less poor, and who are good re-payers. The preference of the field workers for educated clients once again represents the problems of the NGOs mentioned above. Educated clients understand arithmetic well, usually do not create trouble over accounts, understand everything easily, and can help in keeping the records of their groups. But if the NGO's priority is to target the disadvantaged and mobilise the poor, the preference of the field workers for the educated and less poor clients raises a big question.

The main problems of working with men and women clients, as reported by the field workers,<sup>3</sup> are listed below.

#### *Women*

- Husbands create trouble (do not allow the women to join groups, come to the meetings, force them to ask for loans, and so on).
- Illiterate.
- Lack of interest in going for training.
- Difficulty in contacting by the opposite gender (for men field workers only).
- Early marriage.
- Afraid of NGOs being Christian.
- Problem in coming to meetings due to child-care and other domestic responsibilities.
- Hesitate to discuss family planning (for men field workers only).

#### *Men*

- Do not repay loan regularly.
- Migration.
- Dishonest people create trouble.
- Misuse the loan.
- Lack of education.
- Afraid of NGO being Christian.

- Want quick credit.

The above list highlights some key issues. For example, there are some common problems for both men and women like illiteracy, or fear of religious conversion. The above list underlines the necessity of educational programmes (both non-formal and adult) by the NGOs. There are some typical problems in working with men like dishonesty, seasonal or permanent migration, and so on. Interestingly, the problem in working with women clients are mainly caused by their husbands or society — domestic responsibility, early marriage, and so on. These problems could be changed by creation of awareness among both men and women. Unfortunately, as most field workers told me with evident frustration, that they had very little time or support from their NGOs for awareness creation.

## **WHAT CLIENTS WANT AND WHICH FIELD WORKERS CANNOT GIVE**

There are certain materials and services which clients ask from their field workers but who could not provide them. These services deserve a mention because all field workers reported that they felt helpless when they found some services essential for their clients, but could not give them, due to the limitations of their NGOs.

### *Contraceptives*

All women field workers told me that they regularly got requests from their women clients for contraceptives. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, most women clients preferred temporary methods, but due to purdah and other cultural constraints, women could not directly buy contraceptives as these are sold by men. Secondly, the state family planning workers rarely visited their homes. Therefore, the only option left for the women was to depend on their husbands, many of whom were not as interested *in* family planning as their wives (this was more so if they did not have a son). Also, since many husbands were not serious about family planning, they forget to buy contraceptives regularly for their wives. The women clients also felt a sense of shame. Many women field workers reported that on many occasions their women clients offered them money to buy contraceptives for them and sometimes they (the women field workers) did so. But in most cases, women field workers found it very difficult to convince their clients that they could not provide free contraceptives or buy them from the market due to constraints of time and limitations of

their NGOs. Most women field workers pointed out that difficulties in access to contraceptives for women is a major barrier to the family planning programmes in Bangladesh. When I asked women field workers whether they thought if their NGOs should start distributing contraceptives, they responded that with the workload they had it would not be possible for them to carry out this task as well. Instead, they suggested starting an awareness creation programmes among men for family planning.

### *Non-Formal Education*

Among NGOs studied, only Proshika had a non-formal education programme for children. Field workers of the other three NGOs reported that their clients regularly asked them to start non-formal schools for their children. Many field workers said that though clients had been made conscious about education, they could not get this service due to lack of schools. When I asked the clients as to why they did not send their children to the government primary schools, they gave me several reasons. Firstly, clients and field workers told me that the distance to the schools, poor infrastructure, lack of seating facilities, frequent absenteeism of teachers, and unattractive educational methods discouraged students from enrolling or made them drop out. Dreze and Sen (1995) found a similar situation in India. Secondly, although in theory, primary education is 'free', it is not so in practice. Clients and field workers said that teachers charged for books, examinations, school functions, and so on. Thirdly, when children grew up and wanted to go to school, they were ashamed to sit with younger children. Therefore, non-formal schools are the only way out for their education. I found Proshika non-formal schools to be free, the teaching methods attractive and more life-oriented than in state schools.

### *Medicines and Salt for Oral Rehydration Therapy*

Clients ask for these materials mainly for two reasons. Firstly, due to the awareness created by NGOs, many clients felt that it was necessary for the intake of saline<sup>4</sup> when they were affected by diarrhoea. They also thought that due to vitamin deficiency their children needed to take vitamin capsules. Some NGOs had distributed free oral rehydration therapy salts and vitamin capsules when they had got them from donors. Ever since, many clients thought that their NGO should provide them with free salts and capsules too. Sometimes, this created misunderstandings between the clients and field workers.

Usually, state health workers were supposed to distribute the salts free of cost, but did not do so. Many women field workers reported that though they showed their clients the simple procedure of making rehydration drinks with sugar and salt at home, the clients preferred to get ready-made packets. All the field workers were against the distribution of salts because they felt that it was very easy to make ORT drinks at home. The field workers also said that provision of these materials would create dependency on the NGOs.

### *Tailoring Training*

Except for the RDRS, the NGOs had no system of providing training to their clients for tailoring. I found a well-run tailoring training programme for women clients of the RDRS. Initially, the RDRS provided the sewing machines, cloth and other materials and training to its women clients. After a three month training period, when the clients started to earn money, they began to repay the cost of sewing machines. Many field workers said that there were two main reasons for this high demand for tailoring skills. Firstly, tailoring was a very convenient trade for women as they could work at home. This does not affect their purdah and they can carry on with this activity without much effect on their domestic responsibilities. Also, since women usually liked their garments stitched by women tailors, they were assured of an income. Secondly, tailoring training helped women get jobs in the mushrooming garment factories in Dhaka and Chittagong, which mainly employed women.

### *Credit*

Requests for this service only came from MCC clients. The MCC field workers reported that their clients asked for credit, citing the examples of other NGOs and organisations like the Grameen Bank. Many clients became frustrated when they did not get credit and sometimes disenchanted clients left MCC membership too. MCC operated its credit programmes on a small scale from the savings of the clients. All MCC field workers said that they tried to convince their clients of the dangers of credit, by citing examples where clients of other NGOs or institutions had to sell their cattle, ornaments or assets to repay their loans.

### *Tube-Wells*

This is a costlier service than those discussed above. Most field workers told me that during health awareness programmes, they motivated their clients to use tube-well water. Many clients asked their field workers to sink tube-wells in their villages. The RDRS subsidised the

sinking of tube-wells and SCF (UK) had constructed many tube-wells. Interestingly, no field workers (including those from the RDRS) liked the idea of providing tube-wells because they thought that it could be done by the clients themselves.

There was another problem with the advice given regarding using tube-well water. There was an outbreak of arsenic contamination in tube-well waters in many parts of Bangladesh. Field workers, who earlier used to encourage their clients to use tube-well water, now have to advise their clients not to do so. Most field workers said that they had become laughing stock for changing their advice.

## **INTERACTION BETWEEN FIELD WORKERS AND THEIR SUPERIORS**

Wood (1994) gave his opinion on the interaction between field workers and their superiors in Bangladesh (compare Suzuki, 1998). Senior and mid-level managers preferred obedient, sincere and intelligent field workers. If I were in their (the managers') place I would have said the same thing. For example, one SCF (UK) 'partner' NGO Director said that she did not like those field workers who do not get their leave sanctioned at least two to three days in advance, because it hampered her work.

Briefly speaking, the relationships between field workers and their immediate superiors vary from NGO to NGO and from persons to person. Overall, I found the relationship between the Directors and field workers of SCF (UK) 'partners' to be the best, in the sense that trust was greater and they were more sympathetic towards each other. The Directors and most field workers were colleagues who had formed their own NGOs and were from the same area. The relatively flat structure of these NGOs could be another reason for the good relationship between the field workers and their superiors of the SCF (UK) 'partner' NGOs.

The Proshika field staff-manager relationship is ranked next. This might seem unexpected considering the huge size of this NGO. The major reasons behind the good relationship between the Proshika field workers and their immediate superiors was better management at the top and mid-level, and the clear system of promotion. But I also heard some examples of bitter relationships between Proshika field workers and mid-level managers too.

I rank the staff-superior relations in MCC and RDRS at the same level as I heard and saw many examples of bitter relationships in these

NGOs. I shall begin with the relationship between field workers and their superiors where it is best and go on to the poorer relationships, in order to show how relationships between field workers' and their superiors become bad and how they could be improved. When I was talking to the mid-level and senior managers of Proshika they gave me some suggestions for maintaining good relations between the field workers and their superiors.

- If the superiors find any problem with the field workers they do not report it to the higher authority(ies) or serve 'show cause'<sup>5</sup> notices to the field workers concerned. I heard many complaints of 'show cause' or disciplinary action taken by MCC and RDRS mid-level managers against their field workers. Proshika mid-level and senior managers took official action only as the last resort against a field worker. They tried to solve the problem(s) through discussions with the field worker concerned. A Zonal Coordinator of Proshika said that he did not even verbally report any complaint against any field workers to his superiors when he was an Area Coordinator. He always preferred discussions and encouraged all his Area Coordinators to do the same.
- Errors of field workers can be corrected by discussing them in formal and informal meetings without mentioning any names.
- Team spirit is the key element in a good relationship between field workers and their superiors. Some mid-level and senior managers told me they looked after the personal problems of the field workers like accommodation, health problems or financial problems. Woolcock (1998) reported that he found a mid-level manager in the Grameen Bank assuming the roles of marriage counsellor, conflict negotiator, training officer, civic leader and a bank manager. Some mid-level managers of Proshika were like this.
- Relations between field workers and their superiors can be very good if the latter have a sympathetic towards them. I found some mid-level and senior managers to be really sympathetic to their field workers, and their generosity seems to pay-off (compare, Palmer and Hoe, 1997).

However, I have also seen that most senior and mid-level managers believe in the strict supervision of their field workers. I observed and also heard about many cases of bad relations between field workers and their superiors. The major causes appeared to be

- eagerness to discipline or control the field workers, which created misunderstanding;
- withholding benefits from field workers and thus creates frustration;
- not being sympathetic to the field workers' problems and grievances;
- the tendency of many field workers to get new postings without reference to their Area Thana Managers or the Thana Managers (all the managers that I spoke to said that they felt threatened when they found their field workers using 'connections' at the Head Office in Dhaka or District level offices for their transfers).

This problem could easily be solved through the enforcement of strict management at the top level of the NGO. The mistrust and poor relationship between field workers and their superiors not only affects the smooth functioning of NGOs, but also the implementation of their policies. The RDRS clearly exhibits these problems.

### **Making Comparisons**

Many women field workers, particularly of MCC, complained that their women superiors were not sympathetic. The conventional wisdom of recruiting women managers for the welfare of women field workers can be easily challenged here. Some women field workers told me that men superiors were, in many cases, better than women. Many women field workers of MCC, Proshika and RDRS told me that if their women superiors found them to be absent in the field or discovered any irregularity, they never hesitated to send a memo asking for explanations. On the other hand, men superiors asked for explanations verbally, rather than officially.

So, what happens when field workers report their problems to their superiors? Of course, when superiors are sympathetic and the relationship between field workers and their superiors are good, a solution to the problem is to be expected. When the superiors are not sympathetic then problems start.

- When field workers spoke out about their problems, they were identified as 'problem staff' and were disliked by their superiors. In many cases, these 'problem staff' were harassed, and deprived of promotion or suitable postings by their superiors.
- Unsympathetic superiors told field workers, 'Other people are working with it, if you cannot do it, then leave the job'. Field

workers told me, 'What will we and our families eat, if we leave the job?'

- Some superiors did not want to listen to the problems of the field workers or help solve them. Instead, they (the superiors) blamed the field workers for the problems, even though they were beyond the control of the field worker.
- Mid-level and senior NGO managers exploited the ignorance of field workers. When one SCF (UK) 'partner' NGO field worker asked me how many festival bonuses I got, I answered that as a member of staff in a semi-state organisation, I got two festival bonuses on two Eids, each equal to my basic salary, with the non-Muslim staff getting the same. The field workers were surprised, and angry with their superiors, because they had been told that state employees got only one festival bonus each year and therefore, they would also get only one.

I present before you a case narrated to me by some women field workers of MCC.

A woman gender advisor (from abroad) came to visit the MCC and the women field workers had shared their problems with her. The women field workers told the advisor about their problems of child care and accommodation arising out of the MCC rule to live within their working areas. They has also told her about the lack of sympathy from some of their superiors. Somehow, the superiors found out about this. The women field workers were threatened by their superiors and forbidden to complain to the advisor. The gender advisor asked the women to submit a written complaint, but due to fear of losing their jobs and lack of unity among themselves, they could not do that. The two women field workers who led the move were sacked on the grounds of 'lack of funds to keep them' in MCC.

SCF (UK) 'partner' NGO field workers tole me that they did not believe that 'higher operating costs' had led to the handover. They blamed the misuse of money by the SCF (UK) management, giving the examples of buying costly furniture unsuitable for remote rural areas, locating the office in an erosion-prone area, and so on.

Field workers gave me many examples of mistreatment by their superiors. Many MCC and RDRS field workers complained to me that if their superiors come to the office or the field late, no action was taken, even if they inconvenienced many field workers. However, if they (the field workers) arrived late or left early, they were presented show-cause letters. In some extreme cases, some field workers of MCC and RDRS said, that their salaries were cut on the basis of hours

absent from the office or field. Strikes are a regular phenomenon in Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> Most MCC field workers complained that, when politicians or transport workers called for a strike, their superiors just closed the office and stayed at home. If the field workers did the same, they were pulled up for doing so. All MCC field workers said that though they felt this was unfair, they dared not protest for fear of losing their jobs.

MCC compelled all its field workers to live in or near their work area. All MCC field workers were unhappy with this rule. They told me that their immediate superiors also had to follow this rule. This rule was lifted for the superiors, which led to a lot of antagonism.

### *Summary*

1. In cases of complaints of bad relationships between field workers and superiors, there was always a lack of cooperation from the superiors. Field workers not only wanted their superiors to be sympathetic to them, they also wanted suggestions and help in their day-to-day work. Where superiors were not cooperative or did not help, the problems of the field workers automatically increased. Many field workers complained that their superiors were unwilling to listen to their problems and instead of solving them, they were sometimes blamed for raising problems.
2. Most field workers of MCC, Proshika and RDRS told me that they understood the problems of their clients, but when they reported them to their superiors, they (the superiors) did not listen to their (field workers') proposals. Some superiors made no effort to grasp the field realities (because some of them do not visit the clients regularly) and their suggestions were often irrelevant. Sometimes, the superiors undermined the tacit knowledge<sup>7</sup> of the field workers, which made the field workers very unhappy.
3. In some cases, the superiors created divisions among the field workers in order to impose their own decisions. For example, in the Kurigram Sadar office of the RDRS all the men field workers asked their superiors to supply them with calculators for their work. The Thana Manager and the Assistant Thana Managers asked all field workers to sign an application for a calculator. Though all the men field workers signed the application, the women field workers refused (so as not be

disobedient to their superiors, according to the men field workers). Therefore, it was decided that the field workers would buy their own calculators.

This above discussion highlights how relationships sour between field workers and their superiors. Some field workers told me they had mixed feelings about their superiors. Many field workers had bad relations with some of their superiors and good relations with others; it varied from person to person. Some mid-level and senior managers were really sympathetic to their field workers, while some were not. Many field workers said that some of their superiors were driven by their own self-interest and obsessed with the performance indicators of their NGOs. This kind of superior was obviously unpopular among the field workers.

## ACHIEVEMENTS OF FIELD WORKERS

All field workers were asked for an evaluation of their own work. Although most policies were formulated at the top level of NGOs, all field workers felt that there were certain services which they could give or improve in quality.

### *MCC Bangladesh*

MCC field workers mentioned achievements such as:

- economic upliftment of clients through the services provided by MCC;
- increase in poultry rearing, cattle-raising, homestead gardening and vegetable cultivation and consumption among clients;
- increase in awareness of women's rights and health (though, dowry was still a major problem).

MCC field workers reported that 50 per cent of their clients had benefited from their services. When asked about the remaining 50 per cent who had not, the reasons given were (a) the functionally landless were not targeted, and (b) many of their clients remained vulnerable to nature, social structure, and so on. All field workers said that they felt devastated when they found their clients uprooted from their homes and having to leave the village or take shelter on the embankments due to natural hazards or exploitation by landlords or money-lenders. They also felt helpless because they could not make any structural changes in the society (compare Goetz, 1996).

## Proshika

All Proshika field workers were happy that they had brought about some changes in the lives of their clients and shared their goals for the future. The positive changes were:

- the economic situation of most of the clients had improved, with many of the clients managing three square meals in a day, when earlier it was only twice a day.
- polygamy, and forced divorce by husbands had decreased.
- due to the voter awareness programme, clients voted in large numbers.
- health awareness had increased and the clients used peat latrines instead of defecating in open places.

The failures, according to the Proshika field workers, were:

- (a) The problem of early marriage of girls had yet to be eliminated and all the field workers expressed their helplessness in the face of societal pressure. All Proshika field workers expressed a need for more awareness creation activities otherwise things will remain the same.
- (b) Dowry was still a major social problem among the clients.

The field workers felt that the best way to change their situation was to convince the people that they themselves had to change their lot. Many old Proshika field workers felt that Proshika should re-start their campaign to get state land and water-bodies for the landless. They said that though the disparity in society may not be eliminated, it could be reduced by campaigning for land reform and mobilising clients to demand the basic minimum wages.

## RDRS Bangladesh

The field workers of RDRS outlined their achievements as follows:

- Women have become more aware and were coming out of their homes in large numbers.
- Marriages are now registered. Earlier marriages were simply conducted by religious leaders and women could not demand for their legal rights due to lack of documents in the event of a divorce. The number of forced divorces by husbands had also been reduced.
- More children are going to school.
- Preparation and use of oral saline has saved thousands of due to diarrhoea.

- More households have latrines, a result of the health-awareness programmes, and supply of peat latrines by the RDRS.
- Clients have got many income-generating opportunities and more clients now rear poultry, livestock and do homestead gardening.

Still RDRS field workers mentioned to me some of their failures:

- (a) Dowry is still a major problem among the clients of RDRS. The field workers said that though the RDRS had Comprehensive Development Education Centres, which offered two-hour teaching and discussion programmes, these activities were not done very well.
- (b) Although some progress had been made, field workers said they felt shocked when many husbands did not allow their wives to join the RDRS or attend group meetings saying that they must perform domestic responsibilities.

### **SCF (UK) 'Partners'**

The request for contraceptives by women clients has already been mentioned earlier in this article. SCF (UK) 'partner' NGO field workers said that they felt devastated when they heard or came across cases of wife-beating among their clients. These NGOs had no policy to act on this. Dowry was also mentioned as a problem.

### **CONCLUSION**

The above discussion highlights that field workers know their limitations very well and have good suggestions for the future planning of their NGOs. This knowledge could be a major asset for the NGOs. During the course of my discussions with the field "workers, I was informed that this was the first time that they had been asked about their relationship with their clients or superiors and their failures and successes. This, once again, underlines the necessity of discussions with field workers in any decision-making process of the NGOs. The bad relationship between field workers and their superiors can be solved by the management of the NGOs, which are increasingly becoming bureaucratic, state-like. This may put the superiority of NGO over state functionaries into question. If this continues to happen at the field level, policy-makers of NGOs will have to re-think their ways of functioning.

Field workers of NGOs in Bangladesh are social pioneers because they are bringing about changes in the lives of their clients and breaking the age-old social conventions by working in rural areas, riding bicycles and motorcycles, and working in remote areas where government bureaucrats or their staff would never go. With the explosion in the number and outreach of NGOs, field work in NGOs is now a profession in which educated men and women are increasingly joining. Maybe they are accepting field work as a profession after failing to get government jobs.

A major reason why field workers are treated like this could be the saturated labour market for people with these skills in Bangladesh. Clearly, there is a moral imperative for donors and NGOs to reduce poverty as cheaply as possible. Donors want their money and resources to be utilised efficiently and reach the poor. This could be a major reason why donors and NGOs are not concerned about the welfare of the field workers. It is difficult to recruit good people in any low-status, low-pay occupation, and very difficult to retain them once recruited. This also frustrates the goal of empowering their clients where the change agent is powerless. There are at least three reasons why NGOs should reconsider their present policy of attaching little or no importance to human resource management (HRM).

1. It is important for ensuring justice to their staff, like employees in any organisation.
2. It is essential to keep them motivated and improve their motivation.
3. To improve the performance of field workers.

The NGOs seem to be far away from consulting their field workers in formulating HRM policies, let alone allowing them to form trade unions. The NGOs could pursue good consultative planning for HRM. In the interest of a more stable, committed and motivated workforce, all NGOs should pursue policies which promote staff welfare.

## NOTES

1. There is at least one in every Thana town. The national days of Bangladesh are celebrated on March 26 and December 16, commemorating the start of the liberation war and victory respectively. The functions of Language Martyrs day and the

national days are usually organised by the state at all administrative levels and other sociocultural organisations.

2. All these were mentioned by several field workers. Similar questions were asked in the questionnaire survey and were noted down during the personal interviews. So, the number of respondents could not be mentioned.
3. All these were mentioned by several field workers. Similar questions were asked in the questionnaire survey and were noted down during the personal interviews. Therefore, the number of respondents could not be mentioned.
4. Salts for ORT.
5. 'Show cause' is the disciplinary action taken by NGOs by asking their staff to defend themselves in writing against activities like insubordination, corruption, irregularity, misconduct, and so on.
6. Organised by political parties, transport workers, state-owned factory workers, and so on.
7. The knowledge field workers gain through work.

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