

Infrastructure and Poverty Reduction: the Rural Maintenance Programme in Bangladesh

Md. Nadiruzzaman and P.J. Atkins, Department of Geography, Durham University, UK

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Abstract: Poverty is not rooted to any single problem, but rather is very complex in nature. Therefore, a successful programme needs to address a group of coherent issues to eradicate poverty. The Rural Maintenance Programme (RMP) in Bangladesh has been addressing rural infrastructure, livelihood security, nutrition, numeracy, gender, unemployment and many other issues together in a single programme. To make the programme sustainable, the RMP has been trying to strengthen the capacity of rural local government.

Introduction

Poverty is a process of accelerating deprivation, destitution, vulnerability and disempowerment, within which women are particularly vulnerable. The Rural Maintenance Programme (RMP) in Bangladesh has been framed to address these issues by recruiting the most marginalised rural women as members of Road Maintenance Associations (RMA), to maintain rural earthen roads. The objectives are that the roads will remain passable to farmers and other rural stakeholders throughout the year, and the destitute women should develop a new understanding of the socio-economic environment around them. In the scheme they were empowered in terms of knowledge and skills, financial capital, and access to resources. One way of measuring this new empowerment is by reference to the RMP database, which records that 72 ex-RMA members participated in 2001 Local Government Elections in Bangladesh, three were elected as Union Parishad¹ (UP) Chairmen, and 36 were elected as UP Members. Such engagement, although not unprecedented, is sufficiently unusual for women in rural Bangladesh to be worthy of note, and the consciousness-raising of the RMP has played a role. The present paper discusses the RMP in maintaining the rural landscape and ameliorating the livelihood security of destitute women who live there. A variety of empirical approaches are employed, such as sampling, interviews, case studies and focus group discussions with different stakeholders of the programme.

The Rural Maintenance Programme

¹ The lowest tier of Local Government of Bangladesh.

The RMP has been (1982-2006) one of the largest and most successful development programmes of CARE International, funded by the European Union and CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency), and implemented by the Government of Bangladesh's (GoB) Local Government Division (LGD) under the guidance of CARE Bangladesh. The programme was designed to employ destitute women to maintain rural roads and provide them with extensive training in new skills for life changing activities. It has contributed to the betterment of life for a fraction of the most disadvantaged and marginalised rural women in the country, improving self-reliance through employment creation and livelihood development. The RMP was being implemented in 4,200 unions in 61 out of 64 districts, where 42,000 destitute women (the majority of whom were divorced, separated, widowed or outcast) were employed for four year cycles to maintain year-round roughly 84,000 kilometres of rural earthen road (Figure 1). Each year approximately 10,000 women graduated from the programme and the same numbers replaced them.

< Figure 1 here >

Income-generating activities were arranged and these helped to increase the income of the poorest of the poor through partnering local government institutions (LGIs, including UPs and the Upazila Parishads). Since its inception, the programme has been working closely with the UPs and the Upazila Parishads. The key stakeholders were the destitute women themselves at the community level, LGI officials and UP representatives.

The expected impacts of the RMP Project were as follows:

- a. The livelihood security of rural poor, especially the destitute women would improve,
- b. Rural roads would sustain the transfer of goods and services to markets and link to rural institutions, and
- c. Rural women would be recognised as agents of development.

The purpose was to improve the socio-economic status and food security of RMP women in a sustainable manner, and to maintain year-round traffic flow on important designated roads. The expected outcomes of the project include the following:

- a. RMP women would become economically self-reliant.
- b. Improvements in the status of RMP women and their self-confidence, social recognition and opportunities at household and community levels.

- c. Better health and nutritional status of RMP women and their household members.
- d. Improved, year-round use by light traffic of the maintained rural roads.
- e. Local government institutions effectively managing road maintenance independently.

The overall expected outputs of the RMP Project included the development of human capital and community assets, accumulation of financial capital, and improvement of institutional capacity.

Different Components of the RMP

From time to time the RMP has changed its programme strategy and, thus, amended its components. The programme was initiated with just rural earthen road maintenance, to which was added income generating activities in the early 90s and capacity strengthening of local government in 2002. Finally, the RMP has consisted of three components:

1. Road Maintenance Component (RMC).
2. Income Diversification Component (IDC).
3. Capacity Strengthening Component (CS).

Road Maintenance Component (RMC)

This component covers technical aspects of road maintenance management. It deals with the recruitment of road maintenance workers to the RMAs. The UPs manage this component with support from the Upazilas under the auspices of the LGD as part of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (MLGRD&C).

The RMA women are paid Tk. 54 (£0.38 or Rs32)² daily for their work, of which Tk. 14 are transferred to mandatory savings accounts. Wages are paid straight to the Road Maintenance Crew accounts in local banks and each woman also has her own bank account for deposits of the mandatory savings. The crew wage payment and banking system is leak-proof. RMP women employed for roadwork are selected by the Project Management Committees (PMCs) with support from the UPs: only 10 women per Union. Since the numbers of eligible destitute women far exceed project limits, final selection is done through an impartial lottery draw. The selection criteria of RMP women are as follows (Source: RMP/CARE):

- Permanent resident of the concerned Union.

² Exchange rates at the time of writing, July 2007.

- Widowed, divorced, separated or married but abandoned.
- Age between 18 and 35 years.
- Priority to most disadvantaged and dependents (dependents = children, mentally or physically handicapped husband and dependent parents).
- Candidate must be mentally sound and physically capable of performing road maintenance work.
- Former RMP crewmembers who have worked less than one year in the RMP and met the above criteria will automatically be selected. Other than that, no former RMA member(s) can be selected.

Recruited RMP women receive training from Project Management Committees in road maintenance techniques so that rehabilitated roads will meet required standards. Following this technical training, the women are organized into 10-person work crews, named RMAs, one per Union. Each RMA is assigned responsibility for maintaining approximately 20 km of earthen rural roads. The management and monitoring of road maintenance activities are primarily carried out through PMCs in each union. The role of CARE is to observe and monitor the quality of training given to the 1st year and 2nd year women as well as monitor the project-integrity.

Income Diversification Component (IDC)

Women's life skills training and counselling have been provided with a strong focus on developing self-reliant business skills for managing sustainable income generating activities, enhancing understanding and ability in establishing women's rights, health, reproductive health and money counting.

< Figure 2 here >

As part of the women's wages, known as mandatory saving, a sum is saved and deposited in their individual bank account for use as start-up capital for self-managed income generation activities. Each RMA receives a sequenced, four year training programme on various issues and topics. Each woman is assisted with selecting a viable business interest that can generate adequate financial returns on her labour, and then savings and investments. Once each RMA member has been engaged in her chosen income generating activities in the fourth year, she is given regular counselling and advice. Women are given both group and individual counselling in order to critically review and share their business progress, thereby learning from each other about problems or constraints encountered and gaining suggestions from peers about possible ways of solving such problems.

One of the major responsibilities of RMP-IDC is to monitor the performance of participating UPs in regard to recruitment of RMA women, supervision, management and reporting on the road maintenance part, and problem solving of the RMA. The RMP-IDC makes periodic visits to UPs to assess their performance and provide necessary guidance for improvement.

Capacity Strengthening Component (CS)

The project covers the institutional strengthening of LGIs, with an emphasis on planning, management, implementation and monitoring in the road maintenance part of the RMP. Membership in LGIs has continually shifted because of local level elections; whereas continuity of direct local community representation is necessary to make the RMP more responsive to the decision-making influence of local residents. Therefore, for the purposes of managing the RMP at the local level, each Union Parishad establishes a “Project Management Committee” (PMC). Each PMC consists of a female UP member as the PMC Chairperson, the UP Secretary as the Member Secretary and three elected members from local communities (at least one of whom must be a woman) as General Members.

The activities performed by PMC are:

- recruitment of RMP crew members,
- formation of RMA,
- imparting training to RMA on quality road maintenance techniques,
- identification and selection of the 20 kilometres of earthen road to maintain,
- developing quarterly work plans for RMA activities based on the priority of road repairs,
- follow-up monitoring, appraisal and scoring of road repair works completed by the RMA,
- depositing 10% of RMA wages in to the RMA crewmembers bank accounts each year,
- ensuring that the RMA receive their wages every 14 days,
- keeping a record of all work plans and road maintenance activities on file for review,
- consolidated reporting on a quarterly basis, and
- reporting on project progress to the Upazila Parishad.

The specific objectives of the capacity strengthening component of the RMP are to strengthen the management capacity of local government to manage the development activities (including the RMP), to enhance participation of female representatives in the LGI planning and decision-making process, and to encourage the participation of the community members in development activities.

CARE has been providing a comprehensive training package on the project management cycle and project management skills to each UP and its affiliated PMC. The Capacity Strengthening component included important training issues, such as local governance and conflict resolution. CS training has four separate modules ranging from one day to three day sessions.

The training covers issues such as the importance and scope of community and women's participation in development, community and local resource mobilization and techniques of project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation with community participation and feedback. The RMP has encouraged women's leadership roles in the different project committees at the local level and in support of this objective has undertaken special additional training programmes designed to support and enhance the leadership and management capabilities of elected women members of the Union Parishad and Project Management Committees.

The Change of Rural Landscape

The RMP has had substantial successes in developing a sustainable rural earthen road network, which is very important for the transfer of goods and services and to link to many service networks. Before having access to these roads, farmers used to carry their products on their heads or by boat at high expense. Now they use rickshaws or vans with a more reasonable transportation cost, with quicker journeys to market. In the rainy season, water logging used to damage earthen roads, increasing transport costs, time, and labour. With the advent of the RMP, these water-logging problems are reduced. For instance, a van driver of Atajuri Union in Bagerhat district, in discussing road maintenance, stated that when the road was damaged it was really difficult for him to drive while carrying a medical patient, and someone had to push from the back. His reward was Tk 10 per person at that time. At the time of the interview (July 2005), though he now received only Tk 3 for the same distance, he was more satisfied because he used less time and energy, and there was less wear and tear on his vehicle. Jonab Ali, a farmer of Aqua of Mymensingh District, commenting on the road upon which he was interviewed, said that it "used to be undulating with some large and surprising holes that small accidents were a regular occurrence and they were left unattended for a long time. Farmers used to carry their products to markets in other villages. However, now they carry the products to their own local market, which suddenly changed the health and wealth of their local market. Now, many small and medium entrepreneurs come to their local market to buy products, which created more employment opportunities in their market and also attracted the farmers of neighbouring villages to sell their products over here."

The following cases studies show the potential of the RMP, but also that it cannot guarantee the success of its graduates.

Jahanara Begum: A Success Story

Before being selected for the RMP roadwork Jahanara had been staying with her disabled husband, three daughters and only infant son in her father-in-law's house, which was hypothecated at that time. She used to earn wages from household work and paddy husking in neighbours' houses. Then, a four year job in the RMP and seven months in the Post-Flood Rehabilitation Project (PFRP)³ helped her to make every endeavour to change her life. The job in the RMP and a loan from the PFRP helped her to accrue a good amount of savings along with the mandatory savings.

After graduating from the RMP, she had added together her mandatory saving of 7000 taka, 13,000 taka savings from her RMP wages over four years and a loan of 20,000 taka from neighbours and, at last, was able to purchase her existing homestead land, which, she feels, has given her much mental relief and helped to boost her potential. When she was asked to describe how the homestead land would boost her potential, she replied that this land was like a base to her which had assured her shelter. She further added that a homeless person never feels that they can move forward. In addition, she said that it was possible to get the 'huge loan' from her neighbour as she had a regular income during that time and also had grown a social network during the four years working in the RMP. Her elder brother had also given her a 5,000 taka loan, which she had used to purchase a cow for selling milk. In the following year, her monthly income from milk selling had reached 1500 taka, up from 600 taka a month. In addition, she has established a corner shop on her homestead land to make the best use of her husband's potential. She has concentrated on saving and profit maximising. For instance, she had given less priority to paddy cultivation because the accessory costs of cultivation, such as irrigation, fertilizer and day labourers' wages, had increased to the point of reducing profits.

< Figure 3 here >

In next two years she purchased 18 Decimals more of cultivable land, costing 9000 taka, which at the time of the interview was being used for banana and vegetable cultivation, a 5 decimal pond for 2500 taka. Her operating IGAs are given in table 1.

³ The PFRP was a CARE initiated project which provided loans to flood victims without imposing any interest on the loan.

< Table 1 here >

Her shop was losing customers due to the lack of a grain grinding machine but she could not install a machine because her husband would not be able to operate it due to his disability. Therefore, she started a business of goat fattening and duck raising as a coping strategy. Now she has her own house, 10 decimals of homestead land, a 5 decimal pond and 18 decimals of cultivable land worth more than 120,000 taka, a couple of successful IGAs like milk production, goat fattening, a shop, a banana garden, crop and vegetable cultivation and fishing in her own pond, and is earning more than 5000 taka per month. She has a very good affiliation with local elected bodies, NGOs, market retailers and wholesalers, government agricultural extension agencies and so on, involved in small group cooperatives and enjoying substantial support when needed.

She is producing sufficient protein for her family from the fish cultivated in her own pond and milk from her cow. She is independent-minded enough to refuse to give a dowry in her eldest daughter's marriage.⁴ Also her other two daughters are in school, in classes IX and V, and her son is in class IV. Her daughters are also earning from stitching and handicrafts in their spare time. She has a very good understanding with her husband.

Sajeda Khatun: A Failed Case

Sajeda, abandoned by her husband when she was pregnant, was fully dependent on wages from household work before joining the RMP. Her neighbours informed me that she had again got married after being released from the RMP and that her husband left her after only seven days. They assume that he might have taken Sajeda's withdrawal amount, which is provided from the mandatory savings to initiate an IGA or IGAs. They also claimed that Sajeda is not serious about her business and that she has consumed all of her earnings from the RMP, instead of making any further investment. Now she is staying with her only daughter on a local dam (a public resource) in her sister's poorly constructed house and living from hand to mouth.

After being released from the RMP Sajeda used to ferry dried fish and earn wages by working in agricultural lands, especially in chilli fields. When she was asked to provide the breakdown of her

⁴ While working in the RMP, as a Technical Officer-Monitoring of a field office, I had to submit a household livelihood security survey report in each quarter of a year where, in a section, I evaluated the perception and practice of the respondents on the subject of dowry. On the evidence of my survey, it would be very surprising if anyone refused to give dowry for a daughter's marriage. I cross-checked the information provided by Jahanara with her neighbours and the elected member of that ward and found that the information was true.

withdrawal amount she replied, ‘some I had consumed, some were stolen and rest I used to pay off debts’. She said that she had invested only 500 taka for the IGA of dried fish. However, she sold the goods on credit and then failed to retrieve her money. It should be mentioned that from her fifth year business follow-up report, conducted by the RMP, I observed that she was lending money to others which she denied during the interview.

Though she seems to be approximately 35-40 years old, she is getting Aged Allowance under special consideration of the Char Bani Pakuria Union Parishad Chairman. In addition, she was surviving on begging from door to door during the interview and failed to describe future plans to move on from that situation. While talking with Sajeda’s next-door neighbour as a key informant of Sajeda, she said, “she was very idle and was always rude to her neighbours and relatives, which altogether pushed her down”.

Conclusion:

The above discussion gives us some ideas about a major development programme managed by one of the largest INGOs in Bangladesh. However, if the state can develop the capacity of local government, it will be much easier to operate such development programmes on a small scale at the local level. Thus, an effort with rural infrastructure development can change the entire rural scenario and even the landscape. Beforehand, the strengthening of local governance and civil society is the essential context in which such programmes can flourish.

References:

Annual Performance Report (APR) 2005. RMP. CARE Bangladesh.

Annual Performance Report (APR) 2006. RMP. CARE Bangladesh.



Figure 1: The RMA women maintain rural earthen roads to keep them passable year-round (Photo: RMP/CARE)

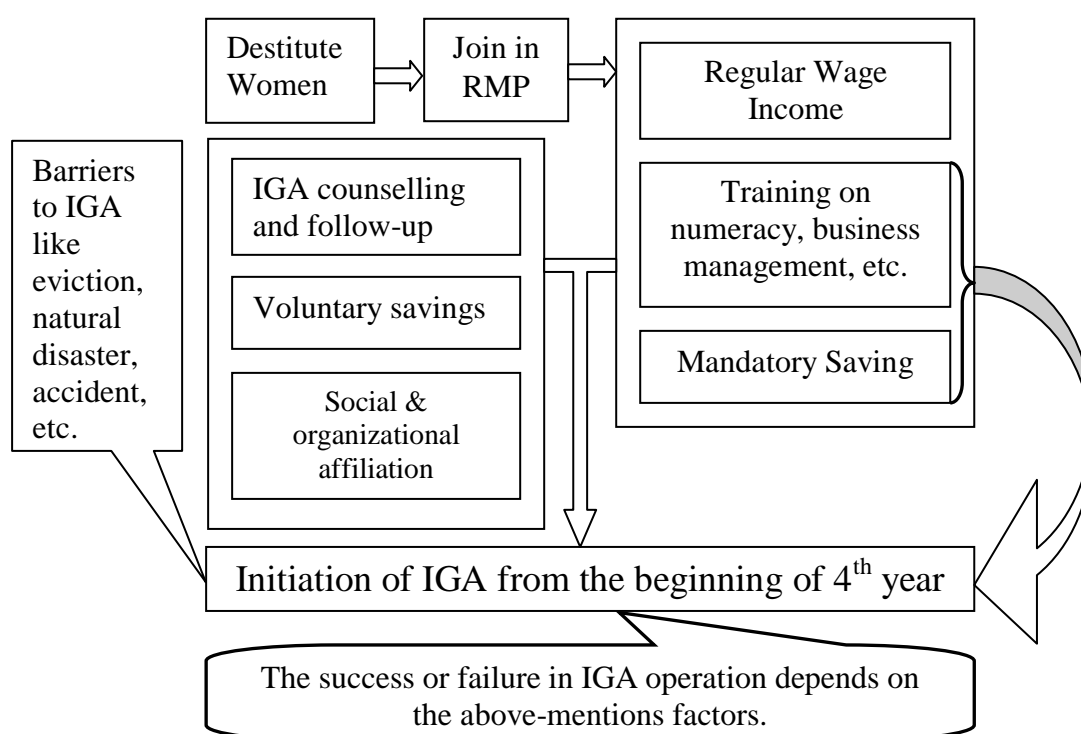


Figure 2: The Framework of IGA Operation by the RMA Women



Figure 3: RMA women are operating Income Generating Activities (IGAs) for their economic amelioration (Photo: RMP/CARE).

Table 1: Jahanara's IGA at a Glance (Local currency 'Taka')

Name of IGA	Initial Status (5 th Year)		Present Status (7 th Year)	
	Investment	Monthly Income	Investment	Monthly Income
Cow for Milk	5,000/=	600/=	20,000/=	2,000/=
Goat Fattening	0/=	0/=	1200/=	-
Corner Shop	0/=	0/=	5000/=	550/=
Banana Cultivation	0/=	0/=	2000/=	2500/=
Vegetable Cultivation	0/=	0/=	2000/=	1500/=
Handicrafts	0/=	0/=	0/=	500/=
Physical Asset Status	5,000/=		150,000/=	