

Discussion Note on Diversity and Equity²

September 2004

1. Introduction

Humans are distinguished and united by differences and similarities according to gender, age, language, culture, race, sexual orientation, income level etc, and such types of diversity often challenge our common understanding, beliefs, values as well emotions as we learn to work and live together in the same environment peacefully and with equal dignity. In theory, difference/diversity does not have to involve inequality and conflict, but in reality they often do. On the other hand, there is also growing recognition that rather than being a source of conflict or tension, diversity can be tapped as a positive resource for enriching human collectivities and organizations. Hence in the contemporary development world diversity and equity issues are being given due importance so as to develop frameworks and approaches which can help key players/agents in enhancing their capacity in addressing such issues towards developing sustainable and effective programs, and ultimately towards achieving success in fighting poverty.

What does diversity means?

In general diversity means a situation that includes representation of multiple (ideally all) groups within a prescribed environment, such as an educational institution or a workplace, or within society generally. This word most commonly refers to cultural differences between social groups or categories, although it can also be used to describe differences *within* a given social group or category, e.g. within the category of Bengali Muslims, there are both Sunnis and Kadianis. An emphasis on accepting and respecting cultural differences by recognizing that no one culture is intrinsically superior to another underlies the current usage of the term.

Equity

Equity means the principle of being fair and offering equal opportunities to all, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion and so on. In the context of deeply rooted forms of discrimination and exclusion, there is often need for ‘affirmative action’—i.e. pro-active measures to create equal opportunities for targeted groups—to promote the inclusion, participation and representation of the disadvantaged and the marginalized. This is what equity means in terms of policies and practices. More fundamentally, it is associated with one of the core values of CARE Bangladesh, ***“Respect for the dignity and worth of every human being”***, by which we affirm the dignity, potential and contribution of program participants, partners, staff and donors.

2. Bangladesh Context

Although Bangladesh is usually thought of as relatively homogenous in terms of language and culture, there is actually substantial diversity—in terms of religion, ethnicity, regional cultural and linguistic variations and so forth—within the country. The common belief that ‘Bangladeshis are homogenous

¹ The Gender and Diversity Core Team of CARE Bangladesh (GDCT) was formed by renaming the former Gender Committee and through expanding its mandate to address GED issues in general (Allbang #2241, dated October 9, 2001, Sub: Organizational “Gap Analysis” for Advancing Gender and Diversity). It was conceived as a LRSP Core Team. The TOR of this team refers to diversity issues in general, but the specific focus is on gender. As an organization we are far behind in achieving gender equity goals within the organization and in terms of our programs. Nonetheless, we do have Gender Policy, GAF, GPOG etc. as tools for promoting gender equity. On the other hand, there is relative lack of similar materials relating to other aspects of diversity (age, ethnicity, disability etc.) and also clear understanding among the staff level. Hence this discussion note focusing on ‘diversity’ issues more generally.

² In the GDCT meeting held on January 27, 2003, it was discussed that “the scope of diversity need to be broadened to include other areas like social class, age along with ethnicity, religion etc. Efforts should be taken to further operationalize the concept of diversity.” It was decided that a position paper or guideline needed to be developed for CARE Bangladesh. One brief outline was prepared by a member of GDCT member and shared in the same group meeting in August 2003. Subsequently, a draft discussion note was developed that has led to this version, after a few round of suggestions, recommendations, and inputs from various members.

in terms of language and ethnicity (Bangali)' prevails very strongly in the country. This kind of unconscious belief has often resulted in systematic discrimination, which mostly arises in treating people as alike and created adverse consequences, hardships and injustices particularly for those people who are from minority groups. The reasons may be economic, political or cultural, but it is hardly acknowledged that the application of uniform policies ultimately bring negative consequences or results for the nation as a whole. In this regard, we may take a brief look at the constitution of Bangladesh.

2.1: The Constitution of Bangladesh

Despite the fact that there exists a whole range of minorities in Bangladesh, the Constitution of Bangladesh does not acknowledge this diversity sufficiently, especially from the perspective of promoting and protecting the rights of various minority groups. Article 1, Part 1 of the Constitution declares Bangladesh as a unitary state". It speaks of Bangla being the official language of the state, but makes no direct or indirect mention of other languages (or ethnic groups) that exist in the country. In the beginning, 'secularism' was one of the main founding principles of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, as enshrined in its constitution. However, this principle was later replaced, and through the 8th Amendment, Islam was introduced as state religion. This move was strongly opposed by 'secularists' in Bangladesh, and caused great deal of insecurity among non-Muslims. However, the amended constitution does say that non-Muslims will also enjoy full rights to practice their own faiths. While Article 28.3 and 29.2 mention a few fundamental rights for minorities, the state is yet to take adequate measures in this regard. As one commentator put it:

In the face of communal tensions the state often assumes the position of protecting all citizens and thereby dismisses the need to establish minorities as a category to be protected. It is because of this that minority and human rights groups feel the need to incorporate constitutional safeguards for the protection of minorities. This is something, which the Bangladesh state and its majoritarian political system still try to resist.³

2.2: Dimensions of Diversity in Bangladesh

Gender: Though one of the fundamental rights under the constitution is that all citizens are to be treated as equal before law, and that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life (article # 27 and 28.2), in family matters all women come under the customary laws based on religion. Thus women's entitlements may not be the same as that of men, and may vary according to the religious community involved. However, despite the differences in terms of religion, there is a common gender ideology (promoting male domination and female sub-ordination in different spheres of life) that strongly control the social and cultural environment and affect the socioeconomic status of women. Hence it is found that gender discrimination is pervasive in Bangladesh. What is particularly notable is that violence against women seems to have reached an extreme and atrocious level than ever seen in the nation before. Intra-household gender differences in terms of labor, capital and social entitlements across all classes are also significant. Such differences at household level have greater manifestation at community, social and state level

There are also *Hijra* (transgender) communities in Bangladesh, living on the margins of society under conditions of stigma and social deprivation.

Religion: In Bangladesh, the term 'minority' is often used to mean 'religious minority'. In terms of religion, the majority are Muslim, mostly of Sunni denomination (A small sect of non-Sunni Muslims, called Kadianis, are often denounced as non-Muslims). But there are also many Hindus and a smaller proportion of Christians and Buddhists in Bangladesh. The breakdown of the population of Bangladesh in terms of religion is as follows: Muslim 88.3%, Hindu 10.5%, Buddhist 0.6%, Christian 0.3%. (Bengali Buddhists originating from Chittagong are known as Baruas.

³ Meghna Guhathakurta; Minority Rights, Identity Politics and Gender In Bangladesh: Current Problems and Issues; 2004

Ethnicity: Ethnically, the majority of the people of Bangladesh are Bengali. However, there are many small ethnic groups, commonly known as 'tribal' or Adibashi ('indigenous' people), that have retained distinct identities, languages and cultural traditions viz-a-viz the Bengali majority. (Anthropologists and historical linguists have shown that the Bengali people, and their language and culture have deep roots in the same sources from which the smaller groups have sprung, but such connections remain largely outside of the ethnic or national psyche of the Bengalis.) The Adibashis belonging to some forty-five groups make up over 1% of the population and live in different parts of the country with pockets of concentration in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Chittagong, Sylhet, Mymensingh-Tangail region, North Bengal and the coastal areas. There are also the Urdu-speaking Biharis, considered stateless people ("stranded Pakistanis"), who live in Dhaka, the northern districts of Syedpur and Rangpur, and in Chittagong. The Adibashis have been demanding constitutional recognition of their distinctive cultures, identities and languages and recognition as 'Indigenous' people, with rights and safeguards laid down in various international declarations and conventions. But GoB has so far not met such demands.⁴ GoB policy towards the 'tribal' people is formulated under a special clause in the Constitution referring to the state's responsibility to take special measures to uplift the status of 'backward' segments of society. (Article 28 Clause 4, which states: Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.)

Language: In Bangladesh, the official language is Bangla. Spoken Bangla has many regional forms, with some dialects (e.g. that of Sylhet and Chittagong) not easily comprehended by people from other regions. Most educated Bangladeshis employ *Shuddha* ('pure' or standard) Bangla in formal speech and in writing, although many use regionally inflected speech forms in informal everyday interactions. Many Adibashi groups have their own languages that are very different from Bangla, and the uneducated among them may face practical difficulties due to their lack of proficiency in Bangla. Another dominant language is English, which also creates barriers in communication for those who are not conversant in that language.

Caste and occupation: Caste inequalities and ideologies found elsewhere in South Asia also operate in Bangladesh, especially among Bengali Hindus. Actually, traces of caste ideology can be found among Muslims as well, for example in the treatment of some Muslim fishing communities as inferior in status than others. Also, the reported treatment of Adibashis as untouchables in some places in North Bengal (NW) is an example of caste-like phenomena. More generally, the existence of caste ideology may be seen in the devaluation of manual labor. In particular, certain occupations (e.g. sex work, sweeping, grave-digging etc.) are seen as degrading and polluting. Individuals and communities specializing in occupations that are perceived as degrading face serious forms of prejudice, discrimination and rights denial (e.g., a sex worker may be denied the right to a proper burial).

Disability: In Bangladesh, hardly any effort is made to be accommodated the physically and mentally challenged people in mainstream institutions. Socially also, they tend to live marginalized and excluded existence. There are hardly any public office buildings or academic institutions that have been consciously designed for wheelchair access.

Place of Origin (*desh* or 'home district' & Bangladeshi vs. Bideshi): People of Bangladesh tend to identify themselves in terms of *desh* or 'home district', each of which has distinctive dialects and local cultural traditions. There are well-known stereotypes associated with different regions of the country. For example, the people of Noakhali are usually perceived as very aggressive, those from

⁴ One small difference to the states general apathy was made when at the initiative of the Bangladesh government and Bangladeshis abroad 21st February, which was celebrated in Bangladesh as the Bengali Language Martyrs Day, was declared by UNESCO to become the International Mother language day in the year 2000. Although done more to get international fame than out of serious consideration for minority languages, it did enable ethnic groups to take up the challenge with the Bangladesh state to draw attention to their respective mother tongues which were neglected in mainstream education.

places like Dinajpur as ‘dumb’, and so on. Bengalis from rural backgrounds, if they fail to speak standard (*shuddha* or ‘pure’) Bangla, are often looked down upon by the urban cultural elite. With rapid urbanization and large-scale migration, regional identities and associated forms of prejudice may be breaking down in some contexts, but generally they are still found in various forms throughout the country, including in large cities.

In a global context, Bangladeshis, like nationals from many other poor countries, have to often confront stereotyped perceptions of them. For example, in many middle-eastern countries, Bangladeshis are dubbed as ‘mishkins’ (beggars), or they may face discrimination and harassment while passing through different ports of entry in northern countries. Even at home, there is a certain hierarchical perception of people depending on their countries of origin. In certain contexts, Bangladeshis may themselves accord higher status or prestige to a westerner than they may do in case of a fellow national.

Age: As in most societies, people in Bangladesh use age as an important marker of status. People of the same sex and social class show much deference to older people. Culturally, respect to older people or the elderly is highly valued. However, within the household and in community affairs, such attitude towards age sometimes results in the neglect of younger people, especially children.

Class and Social Status: In Bangladesh, class and social status are expressed in terms of many social categories. For example, the concept of *bhadralok/bhadramahila* (gentleman/lady) is used to refer to educated (urban) middle and upper classes. It may be said that people in Bangladesh are generally very status-conscious. Status differences are often communicated through various overt symbols (e.g. what you wear, how you speak, etc.), and they feature importantly in everyday interpersonal interaction (e.g. the way one talks to superiors).

Beliefs and opinions: Throughout the ages, individuals holding beliefs and opinions that do not conform to that of the majority have often been marginalized and persecuted in various parts of the world for expressing themselves. In Bangladesh, this trend has shown a sharp rise in recent times and the state and society have failed to protect prominent individuals from persecution for exercising their right to freedom of thought and expression.

Physical features: Although the people of Bangladesh do not categorize themselves in terms of racial categories in the same way that we see in western countries, they do adhere to some deeply-rooted cultural preferences regarding ‘ideal’ physical features. For example, Bangalis often use *kalo* (black, dark-skinned) and *sundor* (literally good looking, but meaning ‘light-skinned’) as antonyms. The cultural obsession with ‘fairness’ may often have deep psychological impact for individuals who may happen to be born with darker shades of skin color, especially in the case of women.

3. CARE Context

Within CARE, diversity means collectively partners and staff at all levels, who embody the richness of diversity found in the socioeconomic and cultural environments in which CARE works. Embracing diversity at CARE means valuing, respecting and fully benefiting from each individual’s unique qualities and abilities in order to fulfill and strengthen our vision and mission. Among other characteristics, diversity includes gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, as well as diverse perspectives that uphold CARE’s core values. As an organization, we strive to create and maintain a work environment that promotes diversity in everything we do.

CARE values diversity, because:

- to enhance and advance our development work, we need a variety of perspectives to inform relevant and responsible choices about how programs are designed, and about how projects are managed and implemented;

- to increase capacity within the communities with which CARE works, we need to build collaborative relationships and partnerships amongst people with a multiplicity of similarities and differences;
- to affirm the dignity and worth of all people, we need to combat discrimination in all its forms;
- to learn and innovate, we need to tap diverse knowledge, approaches and perspectives;
- we believe it upholds our core values of “RICE”

What we want to achieve through diversity, and how:

In order for effective advancement of CARE’s vision and mission, we want to build upon its diversity and sustain an environment of respect and trust through:

- Communication and dialogue that gives voice to all stakeholders in and out of care, and advances organizational learning;
- Decision making that is transparent, acknowledges all voices and is open to learning through review and feedback;
- Advocacy by all staff for the dignity, rights, and participation of all our diverse stakeholders;
- Sensitivity to the perspectives and sensitivities that accompany organizational or individual change, and provision of resources/mechanisms to support all staff through transition
- Recognizing, genuinely learning from, and building upon past and present work on gender and diversity; and
- Ensuring that the commitment to diversity and gender equity is operationalized within CARE and sustained over the long term by establishing appropriate and targeted guidelines, indicators, and procedures for accountability for advancing diversity.

Addressing discrimination in all its forms, and promoting gender equity and diversity are among CARE’s core principles. CI Program Principle-4 reads: “In our programs and offices we address discrimination and the denial of rights based on sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, class, religion, age, physical ability, caste, opinion or sexual orientation”. Once we start identifying or exploring the natures and sources of discriminations, we found a direct correlation between discrimination and diversity. Hence promoting diversity calls for eliminating discrimination in policies, practices and attitudes both in organization and programmatic levels. Gender discrimination related issues give us classic example in this respect.

The LRSP of CARE Bangladesh identifies 'Diversity' as a key Organizational Principle in the following terms:

The richness of diversity found in the socioeconomic and cultural environment of Bangladesh, encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and disability, will be increasingly reflected in our staff and partners at all levels of power and authority. We believe that each person, by virtue of his or her particular context and qualities, has a unique identity and combination of aspirations and abilities. CARE-Bangladesh will strive to understand how the particular conditions of each individual or social group shape their ability to excel, creating tailored opportunities for each to thrive.

CARE-B is committed to be a gender sensitive and an effective organization and accordingly working to integrating and ‘Gender Equity & Diversity (GED)’ thus becomes one of the most important focus areas of CARE Bangladesh both at organization and program levels. This commitment has grown from decades of development work in Bangladesh and an understanding of the relationship between poverty and extreme gender-based inequality and oppression. Institutional mandate on gender reflected in its vision, mission, core values and principles, particularly the LRSP for 2002-2006 promoted gender equity and diversity issue with a special focus on elimination of gender discrimination.

3.1: Addressing Diversity Issues within the Organization

1) Gender balance in overall staff as well in senior management positions is considered one important and positive achievement regarding diversity and equity aspects. As of June 2003, percentage of overall female staff and women in senior position reached at 33% and 20 % respectively. CARE Bangladesh has launched a series of affirmative action in order to maintain gender equity in the organization level. Today, the initiatives for reaching the staff position in a satisfactory level may seem quite adequate, however, we cannot end here. As other sources and statistics of Bangladesh indicates if we look at social ills issues or threat or vulnerabilities faced by the society members, social change and transformation not only gender but other form like racial/ethnic inequity must also be considered as priority. We need to look at this diversity aspect from positive aspect and a holistic view is required to consider this as a resource rather than a problem and only then it will bring a positive change in the society/social justice and equity.

2) The TOR for “Gap Analysis” to Address Gender Equity and Diversity at CARE-Bangladesh (circulated as an attachment with Allbang #2241) also took non-gender aspects of diversity⁵ into account, in terms of maintaining an appropriate level of diversity in staffing, especially at senior management level. As to ensure reasonably diverse representation on the EMT, as well as for other categories of senior management, and for CO staffing in general, three following variables are considered to be used to monitor where we stand in regard to this broad objective, breaking-down our staffing data as follows:

- Number/percent of male vs. female staff
- Number/percent of national vs. international staff
- Number/percent of “majority” vs. “minority” staff

The third variable “majority” means Bengali and Muslim. By “minority” we mean non-Bengali and/or non-Muslim. Thus, this dimension of staffing covers both religion and ethnicity, which are often but not always related in Bangladesh. When monitoring indicates that a reasonable level of diversity is lacking in either the EMT, in other categories of senior management, or in CO staffing in general, the EMT will introduce measures to bring about better balances. The following statistic/example will provide examples of diversity composition among the exiting staffing level.

From HR Statistics:

Religious Identity Based Staff Status (as of Dec. 04, 2003)							
Particulars	Field Office			CBHQ			
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Buddhist	22	8	30	3	4	7	
Christian	31	6	37	8	4	12	
Hindu	166	165	331	19	2	21	
Muslim	1166	537	1703	176	60	236	
Others	1	0	1	1	1	3	
Total	1386	716	2102	207	71	278	

Composition of EMT (As of June 2004)

Total No of Members	Breakdown by different criteria						
	Sex		Nationality		Religion		Ethnic Minority Staff (National)
	M	F	Nat'l	Int'l	Muslim	Others	
16	12	4	9	7	7	9	2 (1 M, 1 F)

⁵ There are, of course, other dimensions of diversity that we have not yet taken into account. This is something we need to keep in mind as we continue our discussion on promoting diversity and equity.

3) Although Bangladesh is usually thought of as homogeneous topographically, in reality its different geographical regions have unique characteristics: e.g. Char, Haor, CHT etc. But in designing programs or setting administrative rules, the uniqueness and diverse characteristics are not taken into consideration for which projects/programs often cannot bring the desired level of output/impact during implementation and also afterwards. It is also seen that the organization usually looks at the higher positions as resource people, but often there are richness of experience and creativity among frontline staff, who are often neglected during policy-making decisions.

3.2: Addressing Diversity Issues through Programs

1) Gender Equity is one of the stated program approaches in the LRSP. Recognizing GED aspect among the women from poor and marginalized groups, CARE Bangladesh is committed to support them to have equitable access to and control over resources, promote mobility and quality participation in decision making to reduce different discriminations at the household, community and national levels. CARE Bangladesh also mandates to support its partners in developing their capacities and building alliances to advocate for social change. However, we do not have any specific guideline regarding non-gender dimensions of diversity.

2) CARE Bangladesh has sought to work with vulnerable groups in most programs. However, there doesn't seem to be any explicit criteria in terms of how factors such as religion or ethnicity are to be taken into account in determining vulnerability. Since poor people are not devoid of identity, they shouldn't be measured only in terms of calorie intake etc, they as well need to be humanized. A strong requirement is felt to incorporate this issue of diversity during project participants/beneficiaries selection. During selection or in any other assessment, in addition of hardcore or ultra poor status, other important variables or measurement indicators regarding diversity need to be considered and only then widest possible dimension of diversity could be achieved in the CARE Bangladesh program levels.

3) The *Adibashis* are clearly among the most vulnerable population groups in Bangladesh. However, we do not seem to have targeted the *Adibashis* in our programs (except recently in the CHT). In most of our LRSP focus areas, there are pockets of *Adibashi* population. CARE can take up special advocacy and awareness-raising programs (not so much directed to the *Adibashis*, but to ourselves and the general public) with a view to promote their rights.

4) In CARE Bangladesh, project design is still based on conventional approaches that target women or economically disadvantaged groups, but rarely those that are vulnerable due to other factors such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or disability. In this regard, there are three factors that hinder the promotion of diversity and equity through our programs:

- a) Lack of understanding of dynamism of social change, and hence programming is still dominated by conventional ideas of project design and implementation;
- b) Lack of technical knowledge about diversity issues; and
- c) Lack of sensitivity on the part of the 'majority' towards the reality of the various 'minorities'.

5) It is found that formally and informally staffs adjust their strategy during their interaction with the different community though project operational strategy is more or less homogenous which do not usually address the diversified needs and characteristic of the community. CARE Bangladesh can explore this important coping strategy in future, e.g. whether they follow any new strategy, what are these, how they interact/deal with the community from diversified background etc.

3.3: Indicators of progress towards promoting diversity:

The recently developed RBA rating scales of CARE-Bangladesh presents a good understanding about the correlation between diversity and discrimination which as follows:

a) Degree of involvement of projects in counteracting discrimination:

- Making program beneficiaries aware of the importance of proportionate and effective representation of women and marginalized groups (e.g. indigenous people, religious minorities, people with disabilities, etc) in institutions.
- Working with accessible local institutions (e.g. Union Parishads, *shalish*) to promote representation of women and marginalized groups.
- Working towards ensuring such representations at national level (e.g. parliament and civil bureaucracy).

b) Organizational commitment to non-discrimination

- Policies offering equal opportunities for all, irrespective of class, sex, color, religion, ethnicity, physical ability and cultural orientation.
- Correct past patterns of discrimination through affirmative action⁶ in hiring and other organizational processes.
- Dialogue with partners and other peer organizations on these issues, challenging them to adopt similar policies and practices.

c) Involvement in larger movements against discrimination

- Monitoring local and international movements aimed at eliminating discrimination in terms of sex, religion, ethnicity, physical ability and cultural orientation.
- Extending moral support to such movements.
- Active participation in these movements, committing time and resources to their purposes and activities.

4. Looking Forward: Future Action Points

To promote diversity and equity within the organization and through its work, CARE Bangladesh must undertake a number of concrete activities under three broad areas over the coming years. These are:

4.1. Conceptual clarity/ technical expertise

- Build on lessons learned from prior/ongoing diversity initiatives; an important first step for CARE Bangladesh would be to develop support for and engagement with diversity issues. GDCT team certainly will take the lead in this respect but mainstreaming this issue would require broader structure in future. Staff like Gender Technical Persons or Rights and Governance Resource Team Members may be involved in the dissemination process and in raising consciousness and providing tools and resources.
- Organize a workshop in order to review current experiences and also for internal discussion and feed back. This workshop will also focus in identification and addressing existing barriers to diversity and build on current strengths
- Develop skilled and diversified staffing by ensuring commitment and accountability among all staff through enhancing understanding of diversity issues. Further course of action may involve work like more in-depth data gathering and analysis, design and implementation of specific strategies to advance diversity. Commit to raising consciousness and providing tools and resources.

4.2. Organizational Policy

Prepare a Diversity Guideline relevant with the organization's mission and vision. In addition, formulate a plan of action aimed at broadening awareness of diversity issues amongst staff,

⁶ Affirmative action, which does not promote protectionist approach, rather promotes substantive equality.

partners and program participants/beneficiaries. Recognize, motivate and reward those who promote diversity

4.3. Programming and Operation

- Design and implement effectively mainstreamed programmes that are diversity-responsive. Ensure that implementation strategy is flexible enough to include local, national, and international needs. Access diversified funding sources by encouraging diverse approaches, skills and thoughts
- Risk assessment of each program should be done on the basis of diversity besides conventional issues like fund size, chances of success, influence of external factors etc. Selection of project or incorporation of new components/ activities aimed at promoting diversity and equity should get high priority even if they may involve “high risk”

This paper is intended to generate further discussion within CARE Bangladesh as to how, why, and to what extent we can address diversity issues in a more systematic and comprehensive way, both within the organization and in the context of our programs. As part of an organization committed to address discrimination in all its forms, and to promote gender equity and diversity, we can perhaps all begin our journey forward by thinking about how *each one of us* can contribute towards the full realization of this principle.