

IC Bangladesh Case Study 1

Building and Strengthening a National Dalit Movement in Bangladesh (2008-2011)

Description of the practice:

What was/is the background to the practice? Describe any key events or actions that led to it?

On paper, Bangladesh has a progressive Constitution which guarantees the equal rights of all citizens; irrespective of sex, caste, religion, ethnicity, or race. Bangladesh has ratified all major international human rights treaties and conventions including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However Dalits and other minority communities across the country continue to experience caste discrimination, social exclusion and practices linked to untouchability.

Estimates vary but sample surveys indicate that there are approximately 5.5 million Dalits and people from socially excluded communities in Bangladesh. They often live in extreme poverty, deprived or excluded from adequate housing, sanitation, health, education and employment opportunities, and from participating in public and political life. The majority of Dalits are landless. It is very difficult to describe the squalid and inhumane housing conditions of Dalit communities in urban areas - with often three generation living in one tiny room. These living conditions act as a barrier to the development of the minds and dignity of Dalit children. Approximately 96% peoples of people from these communities are illiterate).

The current Dalit movement began in Bangladesh in 2002, founded by BG Murthy whose work and vision established Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR). In 2004 the organisation set up in the office of Nagorik Uddyog. Key moments in the organisation's development were the participation of BDHR in the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004, a consultation in Dhaka on the situation of Dalits in Bangladesh in 2006 and the participation of BDHR leaders in a human rights training in Bangkok in 2007. In January 2008, BDHR received its first grant from One World Action, a UK NGO.

Many organisations were working at the local and national level to reduce the levels of discrimination against Dalits and other excluded communities; however they were mostly isolated with no visibility at the national or international level. On April 22nd 2008, at a national consultation, organised by BDHR and Nagorik Uddyog, the national movement *Bangladesh and Excluded Rights Movement* was formed. In January 2009 BDERM and Nagorik Uddyog co-ordinated Bangladesh's first national Dalit conference where 260 Dalit and representatives from excluded communities came together for the first time for two days of workshops, rallies and strategy sessions. This historic conference received widespread media coverage and was a milestone for the Dalit rights movement, capturing the attention of national and international agencies.

This case highlights some of the key strategies, approach and outcomes of BDERM following this event.

What was/is the title/name of the practice?

Building and Strengthening a National Dalit Movement in Bangladesh (2008-2011)

What was/is the aim/purpose of the practice?

To build a diverse and widespread movement to raise visibility and awareness of issues facing Dalit communities, and to lobby and campaign against caste discrimination in Bangladesh. To unite other excluded communities who although they experience caste or descent based discrimination, do not identify with, or recognise the term Dalit.

The national movement – the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movements goal **is to build an equal society by eliminating all forms of discrimination against Dalit and excluded communities on the basis of equality, dignity, prosperity and security.** BDERM’s objectives are:

- To build awareness amongst Dalits and excluded communities of their socio-economic, cultural, and political rights.
- To build public awareness against discrimination based on work and descent.
- To make policy makers (both government and non-government) sensitive and responsible to meeting the rights and needs of Dalit and excluded communities.
- To ensure access of Dalit and excluded communities to development, basic services and benefits.
- To establish unity and harmony, to strengthen the capacity of Dalit run organisations and to play a catalytic role for communication amongst Dalit groups.

What was/is the target group(s)?

BDERM initially focussed on reaching out to current and potential Dalit activists/leaders and Dalit (or sympathetic/interested) organisations across the country.

Targets for lobbying, advocacy and organising are broad – all Dalit and excluded communities, the general public, government, donors, academia and the media.

Who were/are the partners involved (e.g. community based, NGO-based, government institutions, and other related stakeholders)?

Community based Dalit organisations (BDERM members and BDHR).

NGOs - Nagorik Uddyog (support and capacity building) and One World Action (funding and international visibility)

What was/is the duration of practice?

Ongoing

Legal and institutional frameworks:

BDERM internally and externally is based on values of non-discrimination, equality and inclusion. It uses the language and arguments enshrined in national and international human rights conventions and legislation to inform its advocacy and purpose. BDERM has been inspired and informed by the national Dalit movements in India and Nepal, and the international campaigns against caste discrimination – often using similar language/messages and coming together for joint lobbying opportunities where appropriate.

Dalit women play a relatively strong role within the leadership of the movement (although within BDERM’s Board and membership it is still far from 50/50). BDERM raise issues relating to Dalit women both separately and throughout all its programmes. BDERM helped establish the Dalit Women’s Federation last year.

BDERM believe strongly in the participation of their members in all decision-making processes and have established governance structures which reflect this. BDERM are a membership-based organisation and their structure links one member to another. At every level Dalits and excluded people are encouraged and involved, so that they gain confidence and take ownership of the decisions that affect their lives. Within all their advocacy and campaigning BDERM ensure that Dalits and representatives of excluded groups can voice their demands directly to decision-makers. In the process, confidence is built and spaces are created for further participation of Dalits at the policy level.

Implementation of the practice:

BDERM's activities and approach to date have built a national movement which now has:

- 25 member organisations in 10 districts.
- Local Committees in 35 districts, *(there are 64 in total)*.
- Is self-financing through its members to avoid reliance on external funding.
- Established democratic and inclusive governance structures based on its Constitution.

BDERM has focussed on **training its leadership and reaching out to grassroots communities across the country**. Strategies used to develop and strengthen BDERM included:

- **Holding divisional workshops** with Dalit communities in Khulna, Rajshahi, Barishal, Chittagong and Sylhet to discuss the concerns of Dalit communities, to mobilise, strategise and to identify local leaders.
- **Leadership and human rights training** to develop and strengthen the leadership, organisational capacity, and understanding of human rights amongst Dalit leaders in 38 districts. Specific training given to Dalit women and to young people.
- **Annual General Council Meetings** – To give BDERM visibility and its member's ownership over activities –the meetings elect a National Working Committee with the mandate from the general council to run activities over the next year.
- **Ongoing visits, solidarity and networking have been carried out by BDERM leaders** to conduct fact finding and build the capacity of Dalit communities throughout the country - this has been vital for building the movement, community organising and sharing information.
- **Mobilising at Local Level**. BDERM members and District Committees have undertaken activities focusing on community organising, capacity building, raising visibility and taking action against atrocities. These include:
 - **Co-ordinating conferences, training and community mobilisations** – including livelihood and skills training.
 - **Co-ordinating events to encourage people to break taboos**. For example where hotels and restaurants have segregated sitting areas Dalits have gone in and sat with non- Dalits to eat.
 - **Providing legal support**. For example in Jessore members have protested to government officials when people set fire to a Dalit house, and their intervention in a rape case resulted in a Dalit girl receiving compensation and the perpetrator being sent to prison. In Monirampur in December 2010, 71 Dalit students were prevented from participating in their National Day event. As a direct result of BDERM protests the teacher was transferred. The case received mass media coverage and highlighted caste discrimination within education.
 - **Cultural and sports events** – for example in Jessore, during the World Cup, women from the Dalit community formed two teams - mothers and daughters. Despite opposition from community leaders they held a football match (Mothers 4 vs. Daughters 1). Four thousand people came to watch, including the Deputy Commissioner and the game received national media coverage.
 - **Campaigns on specific issues to local targets - In Sylhet**, a book about tea garden workers was launched at a seminar attended by 150 workers. Members are campaigning for better housing and increased wages for workers, and as a result, wages have been increased from 32 to 48 taka per day. Sweepers from tea gardens were previously not allowed to take meals in hotels and restaurants but this has now changed, as a result of members' protests. **In Joypurhath**, BDERM issued a memorandum to his Deputy Commissioner. As a result the administrator built a community centre and school for sweeper's children. **In Barishal**, BDERM presented the Barishal City Corporation with requests to provide secure housing, increase in wages, fresh water and death certificates for sweeper community. As a direct result the Mayor increased wages from 600 to 1500 taka per month.

Describe the successes and challenges to implementing the practice

Through grassroots organising and outreach there has been a transformation in attitudes and confidence amongst some Dalit communities where BDERM have trained and mobilised- increased awareness of rights and entitlements.

Conditions for success. A culmination of different factors:

- The vast scale of poverty and desperate need of Dalit and excluded communities particularly the lack of income, poor health and nutrition, crowded and inadequate housing, lack of adequate water and sanitation, and limited access to or exclusion from land and government benefits. **BDERM has given voice to the widespread anger, frustrations and needs of Dalit communities. An issue whose time had come.**
- **Combination of partnership** between emerging dynamic Dalit leaders and organisations (BDHR and BDERM members), a national human rights NGO with strong capacity and track record in facilitating and supporting social movements (Nagorik Uddyog), and supportive international actors (IDSN, OWA). Inspired by other national movements – time and money was allocated to regional and international exchanges which developed confidence about what was possible.
- **The commitment of a few but very focussed Dalit leaders** who have worked extremely hard, respectfully and collectively and come together at a critical time in history – they have put personal politics and gains aside, maintained their links with grassroots communities and encouraged other leaders to come on board.
- There has **not yet been a violent backlash** against Dalits and excluded communities (from speaking out/claims over resources etc.) as has happened in other countries, - this has not hampered activities or put people off from joining.
- **Relatively progressive donors** – UK, Danish, EU etc. – are major stakeholders in Bangladesh and have become allies and supporters of BDERM.
- BDERM reached **out to key human rights activists, journalists and academics** (due to positioning and support from Nagorik Uddyog). The issue captured attention and imagination of well-known experts in Bangladesh which has given BDERM further legitimacy and credibility.
- **Joining the International Dalit Solidarity Network** in March 2009 gave BDERM increased visibility and influence at the international level.

Challenges

- **Ongoing divisions** amongst Dalit and excluded communities - for example some people do not feel comfortable identifying with the word Dalit or want to maintain decent based occupations and jobs allocated on the basis of caste (e.g. sweepers) as at least it provides some level of job security.
- The **current lack of data and surveys** hinders lobbying, programme development and tracking impact and success. It is difficult to lobby for budget allocation, quotas, representation without clear and accurate figures about how many Dalits and excluded communities live in Bangladesh.
- Some original members of BDERM have withdrawn due to disagreements – as with all social movements **claims over who speaks for who, competition for external funding and visibility, and ‘ego driven’ personality clashes** have arisen at times and need to be constantly negotiated, acknowledged and discussed so they do not distract or destabilise the movement. **BDERM’s commitment to building diverse and multiple leaders, accountable governance structures and reliance on very limited external funding are all strategies which have helped ease these inevitable tensions.**
- **Self-exclusion and complex forms of discrimination.** Some Dalit communities clearly do not to be ‘mainstreamed.’ Can their distinct culture and contribution be maintained without this leading to distinct forms of poverty, exclusion and isolation? Caste discrimination within Dalit communities also needs to be tackled.

In just a few years with extremely limited financial resources BDERM have made strong steps forward. This case is innovative as it shows that with the right approach, partners, resources and leadership, there is the potential for progress to be made in protecting and promoting the rights of Dalits and excluded movements. The synergy of the vision and effective lobbying of BDERM, the support from Nagorik Uddyog, lessons learnt from movements in India and Nepal, the surge in interest from international institutions and journalists, and a sense of outrage that untouchability and caste discrimination exist in Bangladesh has culminated in a growing and forceful movement for change.

‘We have trained and organised Dalits in Dhaka, so for the first time in our history we are starting to live a more dignified and hopeful life - peoples are speaking out and not hiding their identity. Our children now go to school, we are voting, we have lobbied for better healthcare and housing, and our existence is finally being recognised. We are climbing a mountain because of our partnerships and work. However the quality of life for Dalit people is so bad that

they are not considered as human beings even in the twenty first century. We face exclusion, oppression and no human rights.'

Bothanki Solomon, President, Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights

- Identify three key recommendations for similar practices/initiatives that can be replicated in the future. How could the process have been improved and sustained?

- Governance is vital – put time and effort into getting it right.
- Focus on building local level leaders and grassroots support outside the capital – allocate training, resources etc.
- Start small in terms of funding (BDHR's external grant for first three years was very small).
- Build diverse leadership – share opportunities for being media spokesperson, international travel etc. to avoid competition and over reliance on a few people.
- Put Dalit leadership and voice at the front/heart of all activities - for non-Dalits to respectfully facilitate only when and where they are asked to do so.

Publicity:

Can IDSN use this case publicly, e.g. on an open conference website or in a conference report? Yes