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## EVERYDAY FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION IN BANGLADESH

Learning from Fifteen Cases

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines fifteen cases of collective action in six villages in rural Bangladesh. Collective action was defined broadly and identified from significant episodes in previous life-history research in the same villages. The types of collective action identified were catalyzed by marriage; dowry and domestic violence; disputes over land; illness, injury and death in accidents; and theft and cheating. The role of development NGOs was less significant than would be expected considering their visibility in rural Bangladesh. The study suggests that 'everyday forms' (Scott 1985) of collective action often occur spontaneously and informally, with significant impact on peoples' wellbeing, but with ambiguous outcomes for some poor people involved. This is a different picture that is usually understood in Bangladesh – due to the visibility of NGOs – particularly by outsiders. Local government elected chairs and members play a key role in collective action events, which often include local arbitration, or *shalish*, hearings. A deeper understanding of how collective disputes and struggles are commonly managed in everyday life should help us to hold a more realistic view of the empowerment potential of interventions aimed at fostering collective action in rural Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** collective action, disputes, Bangladesh, social norms

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# EVERYDAY FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION IN BANGLADESH

## Learning from Fifteen Cases

Peter Davis<sup>1</sup>

(with Rafiqul Haque, Dilara Hasin, Md. Abdul Aziz and Anowara Begum)

### INTRODUCTION

Studies of collective action usually start with a definition of what the author means by collective action, often with references to collective action theory.<sup>2,3</sup> In many of these discussions, collective action is defined in terms of organized agency by a group to promote its own interests, or rationally directed towards a particular common goal.<sup>4</sup> This often leads to research strategies that identify and sample cases of collective action, and explore how they contribute to the promotion of collective interests or common goals. Collective action research has been particularly successful in understanding how beneficial public goods can be fostered, such as in the management and coordination of common property or natural resources, and in the prevention of public 'bads' as in the 'tragedy-of-the-commons' or free-rider-type problems.

This study is nested in a larger research project exploring poverty dynamics in Bangladesh (see Davis 2007; Quisumbing 2007; Baulch and Davis 2008) and examines fifteen instances of collective action identified by field researchers during the qualitative phase of our research project in six villages in four districts (see Tables 1–4 below). Households for life history interviews were a random sample from each of four categories of household identified in a previous longitudinal household survey.<sup>5</sup> In this part of the study we were interested in seeing which forms of collective activity (formal and informal) emerged as significant in the everyday lives of rural people in the sites we were studying without any initial preference for the type of collective activity.

The aim of this study was to explore the kinds of collective action that were *most significant* in the life trajectories of rural Bangladeshis. The idea was to explore what was happening in terms of collective action in rural Bangladesh 'on the ground' rather than defining 'collective action' too rigidly in advance. The notion

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<sup>2</sup> See Meinzen-Dick et al. (2004) for a recent discussion of collective action theory.

<sup>3</sup> See McAdam et al. (2001) for an excellent theoretical development of collective struggle.

<sup>4</sup> A common definition of collective action used in discussions is that of Marshall (1998) who defines collective action as "action taken by a group (either directly or on its behalf through an organization) in pursuit of member's perceived shared interests." See also Meinzen-Dick et al. (2004), pp. 4–10.

<sup>5</sup> The categories were: 1) households which had moved up across the national poverty line between 1994 and 2007; 2) households which had moved down across the national poverty line; 3) households which had remained below the poverty line; and 4) households which had remained above the national poverty line.

of people acting together in a group towards a certain goal was key; however, we also wanted to recognize that collective action may not necessarily be beneficial for all, nor empowering for all, nor always coordinated, nor planned, nor without conflict.

We decided to identify and sample events and sequences of related events, which involved collective action of some kind and which had had a significant impact on the wellbeing of certain people (enough that it had been identified in our previous life history research). We wanted to better understand the dynamics of common forms of collective action in rural Bangladesh using a broad and inclusive definition of collective action – somewhat broader than in studies that focus on resource management and coordination problems – in order to gain a realistic picture of the context and types of collective action that were most significant in affecting people’s wellbeing.

The collective action was not necessarily restricted to actions which were rationally aimed at achieving group interests – we recognized that the motivation behind collective action was often complex and messy, with instrumental, value orientated, affective, or traditional motivational orientations, as in Weber’s four ideal types of social action (Weber 1922). We also wished to avoid the assumption that collective action was, by definition, beneficial, or that it always consisted of action oriented towards a rationally perceived and unified group interest.

In many collective action studies we sometimes get a picture of organized groups managing irrigation systems, common property, or natural resources, where collective action can resolve coordination and tragedy-of-the-commons-type problems. However, when we sample using life histories we get a slightly different and, we would argue, more realistic picture of the more significant and common forms of collective action in rural Bangladesh. These actions are motivated as much by commonly held values, traditions, and feelings of fairness and justice as by the need to coordinate to achieve perceived common interests. By defining and sampling collective action in this way we also found that while NGO-related groups were present in our research sites, their activities were not the most common, nor significant, forms of collective action.

Our findings suggest that the kinds of collective action that really count for poor people in Bangladesh are complex, often messy, and very difficult to conceptualize. However, many studies of collective action focus on planned activities fostered by formal organizations and neglect the more informal activities that seem to actually have more impact on peoples’ everyday lives. The tendency of over-estimating the significance of NGO-sponsored collective action in Bangladesh is understandable considering the success of NGOs in the delivery of micro-finance in the country.<sup>6</sup> In rural Bangladesh collective action is often assumed to involve these organizations and to lead to empowerment of some kind.

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<sup>6</sup> NGO-organized groups are ubiquitous in rural Bangladesh. Many studies of collective action in Bangladesh focus on the activities of these groups. In our research, NGO groups were ever present, but their main role in the communities we studied was in facilitating micro-finance provision and collection of repayments rather than having other collective-action outcomes. The authors are aware of a number of NGOs who focus on collective action in Bangladesh, such as Nijera Kori (see Kabeer 2003); however, in the sample of life histories we used in our six villages, it was non-NGO-related collective action that showed the most significant impact on people’s life trajectories.

In this paper we examine a number of activities that can be described as 'collective,' but were, in the main, not planned or linked to formal organizations or NGOs, and produce ambiguous 'empowerment' outcomes. However, in our experience, these types of collective action – often catalyzed by marriage and dowry disputes, land disputes, helping people after accidents, and collective responses to crime or injustice – are most typical of everyday collective action and contestation in rural Bangladesh.

This paper explores a range of complex everyday collective activities identified in six Bangladeshi villages. We refer to these types of incidents as 'everyday forms' of collective action, alluding to the hidden 'everyday forms of resistance' identified by James Scott in his studies of peasant communities in South-East Asia (Scott 1985). The episodes described involved a range of intermediaries, used both formal and informal channels, and showed patterns of strategic behavior enabled or constrained by the norms related to respectability, justice, reciprocity, subsistence, and gender. They tended to arise quite spontaneously, often in response to a crisis or disagreement.<sup>7</sup>

The cases which emerged as most significant in terms of people's wellbeing illustrate how various events at local levels often catalyze collective action, which is then often mediated by local power-brokers, such as local government chairs, members, and other political leaders acting on behalf of, and often pressured by, groups of villagers. Non-governmental development organizations (NGOs) providing micro-finance were ubiquitous in the study villages, but – perhaps surprisingly – their influence did not feature strongly in the incidents of collective action we identified.

## **CONCEPTS AND METHODS**

We were interested in understanding the relationship between various forms of collective action, the various resources, assets and power people held, and the way these combined to influence people's wellbeing – particularly poor people, and especially poor women. Our initial conceptual framework in Figure 1 formed the basis of discussions at the project launch workshop held in Dhaka in July 2007. In this diagram we depicted the link between assets/resources and wellbeing through the social context of groups, networks and identities in which collective action occurs. During the workshop, breakout-groups of policy makers and development practitioners discussed what should be included in a study of collective action in rural Bangladesh. One of the points repeatedly emphasized by workshop participants was that most collective action (widely defined) in Bangladesh is spontaneous and informal and not necessarily organized or facilitated by formal organizations such as NGOs, which are particularly concentrated in Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup>

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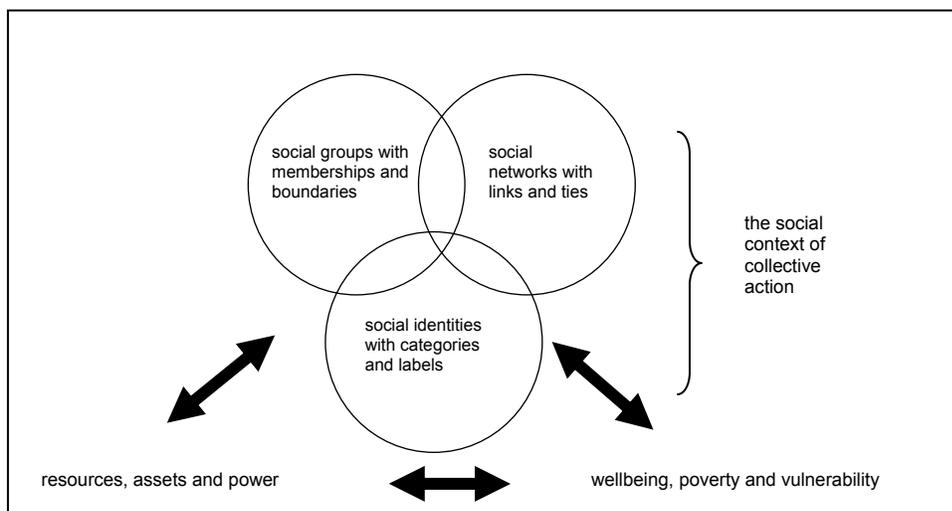
<sup>7</sup> See Roy (1994) for a detailed anthropological study of a complex village conflict, which developed after cows were discovered eating a neighbor's crop in Bangladesh and eventually involved large numbers of people.

<sup>8</sup> See Davis and McGregor (2000), Davis (2001), Devine (2003, 2006), Lewis (2004), and Lewis and Hossain (2008) on the role of NGOs in Bangladesh.

These discussions then guided us once we were in the field, where we concentrated on identifying cases of collective action which had had a significant impact on the wellbeing of research participants and their co-villagers in the research sites. We were concerned with exploring the gender dimensions of collective action and interviewed both men and women with a four-person research team (two men and two women). We had already conducted life-history research (see Baulch and Davis 2008) in these sites so we were able to identify collective action events that had had a significant impact on people's wellbeing as reflected in the life histories. This method of sampling provided different picture of the relative importance of various events in people's lives than if we had used collective action organizations as an entry point for sampling.

The study used a sub-sample of the CPRC-IFPRI<sup>9</sup> panel study in six villages in three district sites: Manikganj, Jessore and Mymensingh/Kishoreganj.<sup>10</sup> In each of the districts, two villages were selected, and, in each village approximately twenty life history interviews had formed an entry point (see Baulch and Davis (2008) for a description of the life history methods). The life-history households in turn were a subsample of a longitudinal household survey of over 2000 households across 14 districts (see Quisumbing 2007).

**Figure 1: The social context of collective action: linking power-resources to poverty and wellbeing**



<sup>9</sup> CPRC stands for Chronic Poverty Research Centre. IFPRI is the International Food Policy Research Institute.

<sup>10</sup> These sites were chosen for this study of collective action because they were where a previous study had focused on the impact of NGO organized agricultural technology interventions. The Mymensingh/Kishoreganj site spanned the district boundary: one village was in Mymensingh and the other in Kishoreganj. Because the sites were geographically close, they were treated as one 'site' in the study.

In our previous research (see Baulch and Davis 2008), life–history interviews were used to explore upward and downward trends in wellbeing of individuals within households and relate them to various causes, including collective activity. Once a number of collective action events were identified in these life–history interviews, these events became the subject of a separate set of case studies. By starting with the life histories we were able to identify the most important events in terms of the influence on wellbeing based on experiences which emerged during the narrated life histories.

In the collective action case studies we focused on exploring social relationships, patterns, and processes, which linked the wellbeing and empowerment of women and men to various forms of collective action. Empowerment was seen in terms of the ability of people to seize opportunities to improve their lives and change their communities on one hand, and the ability to cope with various shocks and crises that may befall them, on the other. Thus empowerment was seen in terms of the enhancement of opportunity and the reduction of vulnerability.

The research team spent about ten days in each site at the end of 2007 investigating these episodes of collective action. Up to 11 interviews per case were carried out with a range of people linked to each case. A snowballing technique was used to identify research participants where previous participants helped to identify other local people who were also involved in the particular collective action event. Female researchers interviewed women, and the male researchers interviewed men. All the interviews were audio recorded, and the transcripts and field notes were analyzed and explored using nVivo 8.

## **CAUSES AND PATTERNS OF EVERYDAY FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Collective action occurs in many spheres of life in rural Bangladesh. Across the 16 villages where we conducted life–history interviews, we were aware of collective action involving a range of organizations. Examples of these activities include NGO organized cooperative groups, irrigation cooperatives, and groups organizing labor migration. However, this study focused on six villages, and Tables 1–4 provide a summary of the fifteen cases of collective action which were identified and studied in these six villages. These cases of collective action could be grouped in various ways. Here, we have chosen to group them according to the type of event that catalyzed them. The catalysts of collective action varied, but tended to be events with a potentially disruptive impact on the wellbeing of a person or people involved:

1. Events linked to marriage, dowry, divorce, and domestic violence (5 cases);
2. Events linked to disputes over land ownership or land occupation (5 cases);
3. Events linked to a person’s illness, injury, or death (3 cases);
4. Events linked to theft or cheating (2 cases).

## **MARRIAGE, DOWRY, DIVORCE OR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (5 CASES)**

There were five cases (see cases 1, 6, 10, 11, and 14 in Table 1 below) which were catalyzed by events linked to marriage, dowry, divorce or domestic violence. In four of these cases, a boy and a girl were involved in what were considered by the rest of the community to be unacceptable relationships. In all cases, large numbers of people (often more than one hundred) were involved in negotiating and pressuring various parties to ensure what could be collectively seen as a just or respectable outcome.

In the arrangement of marriage in rural Bangladesh there are invariably high economic and social prestige stakes, and conflict and collective action often occur when things are seen to go wrong. When this happens, relatives (often beyond the immediate nuclear family), village leaders (*matbars*), and local government leaders (Union Parishad (UP) chairmen and members) are usually involved. Local arbitrations (*shalish*) are commonly part of the process (sometimes involving a selected jury board to make a decision). All of the five cases discussed here involved *shalish* hearings, and, out of our total of fifteen cases of collective action, thirteen involved *shalish* hearings.

The *shalish* is a longstanding social institution in rural Bangladesh, which is seen as a local, informal alternative to a formal court-case. Village leaders (*matbar*, *morol*), local government chairs and members and other respected people are called to discuss and arbitrate, along with the people involved in the cases. In the case studies examined, many of the disputes were addressed in *shalishes*, and these were usually dominated by the most powerful men in the area. However, it seemed that in many of the cases the outcome was seen to be fairer than outcomes from formal court cases, which are often delayed and more likely to be influenced by bribery. In some case studies (e.g. cases 6, 10, 11, and 14), court-cases and *shalishes* were used in the same dispute. The formal court-case was a fall-back option if the *shalish* outcome was not seen as acceptable to one of the parties. Often, the parties agreed to withdraw formal cases during the *shalish* so that a resolution could be finalized informally.

It is also common for one party to disregard the *shalish* either by not appearing or by ignoring the settlement that is agreed upon. This happened in cases 4 and 7. This was more possible if the party was no longer resident in the village and therefore less bound by local expectations. Not turning up to a *shalish*, or disregarding decisions made were frowned upon as contravening norms of respectable behavior.

*Shalishes* have the advantage of drawing from collective intimate local knowledge of complex events. They also seem less likely to lead to outcomes which contravene locally held norms of justice or fairness. However, they are dominated by powerful men and tend towards outcomes that maintain the peace and uphold patriarchal norms of respectability, particularly when it comes to decisions about marriage and dowry. In three of the five cases linked to marriage and dowry (cases 10, 11, and 14), alleged abduction or rape had been reported by one party. However, the *shalishes* that dealt with these cases focused on keeping the peace and maintaining respectability, particularly so that the girl involved could be married.

It may seem unusual to consider the *shalish* a form of collective action. However, the *shalishes* involve large numbers of people (up to 150 in these cases) and remain an effective, while imperfect, way of resolving local disputes and addressing injustices. They do allow voice for poor people, operate with considerable transparency, and draw from an intimate and collective knowledge of the situation. However, they tend towards outcomes which are unlikely to challenge local power structures and tend to reinforce patriarchal values, particularly in issues dealing with marriage, dowry, divorce, and violence against women.

We are in conceptually difficult territory when we consider how *shalishes* relate to collective action as it is usually conceived. Obviously, a group of people, which is usually one faction in a dispute, can act collectively to influence the outcome of a *shalish*. However, the *shalish* itself can also itself be seen as an episode within collective action – of a group of people attempting to find an acceptable solution to a dispute – and the outcome will reflect prevailing norms and the prevailing balance of power in the community. Many NGOs have campaigned to increase women’s voices in local *shalishes*. In the cases we examined, women certainly had an influence, but this was more in working behind the scenes than in taking a leadership role in what are still particularly male dominated occasions.

**Table 1: Cases involving marriage, dowry, divorce, or domestic violence**

Case	District	Nature of incident	Year	Major actors/intermediaries	Form and extent of resolution and other outcomes
3	Jessore	The elopement and secret marriage of a boy and a girl led to conflict, informal arbitration, compensation, and divorce arrangements	2007	Relatives and neighbors, Union Parishad (UP) chairman, UP members.	Informal arbitration ( <i>shalish</i> ), compensation, and divorce arrangements
6	Mymensingh	Domestic violence and abuse led to informal arbitration by local leaders	2002	chairman, members, other political leaders, relatives	Arbitration ( <i>shalish</i> ), violence ceased.
10	Kishoreganj	A boy was blamed after a teenage girl became pregnant. The child was aborted. Acid was thrown on the girl by an unknown assailant (two different parties blamed different people). She was treated in hospital in Dhaka with help from an NGO. Court hearings followed, and a settlement was reached involving an arranged marriage to the boy and gift of land to the girl's family.	2001	Relatives, police UP chairman, NGO workers, lawyer	A marriage was arranged between the boy and the girl after the boy had spent about 6 months in prison. Some money was given by an NGO to help with medical treatment.
11	Manikganj	Alleged rape and pregnancy outside of marriage led to a dispute, a local <i>shalish</i> , and marriage arrangements of the alleged rapist to the girl. After the marriage, arguments over further dowry payments led to domestic violence and to a court-case and further disputes.	2006	Relatives, village <i>matbars</i> , UP members.	The village <i>shalish</i> decided that the boy should marry the girl and set a dowry to be paid. The couple is married, but disputes between the families continue over dowry payments.
14	Manikganj	Abduction and forced marriage of a teenage girl. A court case followed, but the eventual settlement was achieved through 2 <i>shalishes</i> . A marriage was arranged between the girl and the boy who kidnapped her. He later got a job abroad, and the girl was treated badly by his family. This led to a second <i>shalish</i> , which decided that she should live with her parents while her husband remains abroad.	2006	Relatives, police, <i>matbars</i> , UP chairman and members, ex-chairmen, school master.	Two <i>shalish</i> hearings led to a marriage arranged and then an arrangement for the girl to live with her parents while her husband remains abroad.

## **LAND DISPUTES (5 CASES)**

The transfer of ownership of land is fraught with difficulties in rural Bangladesh. In order to sell land, or change its ownership a number of official papers are needed: the ownership registration document, the government land record, and land tax receipts. Sale, inheritance, and gifting of land, as well as less scrupulous forms of appropriation of land, are the main ways that land ownership changes.

Expropriation (*jal kora*) of land by force combined with corrupt changing of deeds occurs frequently. Because of the possibility, via corrupt means, to alter title deeds (for example, case 4); many people are forced to defend the title to their land in court. Often, these cases take several years, or in some cases, decades, to resolve. In the meantime it is often the party with the strongest power base who is able to occupy the land in question. In case 7 below a disabled man legally owned a plot of land but was unable to occupy it because he was being threatened by previous owners. Also, in cases 12 and 13 below, land was legally owned, but the owners were prevented from occupying it by other more powerful people. The occupation of land involved a group of supporting villagers helping the owner to physically take control of the land. The support of local leaders was also crucial in coming to a settlement.

From these cases it seems that the resolution of land disputes often goes against the party with less social power. In these cases four out of five cases had an unsatisfactory conclusion. Land disputes and collective action over land ownership seemed to be more a symptom of the disempowering effects of widespread corruption in land administration and in the courts, rather than a reflection of empowerment. Improved land administration, reliable adjudication and conveyance would reduce the number of harmful local conflicts over land and prevent powerful people from illegally occupying land owned by the less-powerful. When collective action occurs in these cases, it is an attempt to mobilize social power in order to achieve an outcome favorable to a particular faction or party. The collective action will therefore not necessarily lead to a just or fair outcome.

**Table 2: Cases involving land disputes**

<b>Case</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Nature of incident</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Major actors/intermediaries</b>	<b>Form and extent of resolution and other outcomes</b>
4	Jessore	A dispute over the ownership of land led to formal court cases but was followed by a resolution through informal arbitration.	1999	Union Parishad (UP) chairman, <i>matbar</i> , lawyers.	Failed local arbitration ( <i>shalish</i> ). Court cases continue.
7	Kishoreganj	A disabled man bought land, but the first owner refused to allow him to use the purchased land. A <i>shalish</i> ruled that the first owner should hand the land over, but this was refused.	2003	UP chairman, members, police, relatives.	Several <i>shalish</i> hearings, still unresolved.
9	Kishoreganj	Land dispute led to violence and injury. Settlement was made through a village <i>shalish</i> organized by the UP chairman	2007	UP chairman, members, police.	Dispute resolved in a village <i>shalish</i> presided over by the UP chairman.
12	Manikganj	A poor man discovered title deeds to land that his father owned, but this land was occupied by a wealthier villager. With the help of local leaders ( <i>matbars</i> ) and the UP chairman and members he was able to occupy some of his land but only after a violent dispute with injuries and a court-case.	2004	UP chairman and members, <i>matbars</i> , police, lawyer.	The poor man has been able to occupy some of his land.
13	Manikganj	Land dispute after the vendor took money from two different parties for the sale of the same land. Local leaders arbitrated, and an unsatisfactory compromise was reached with the weaker party disadvantaged.	2000	Four local village leaders ( <i>matbars</i> )	A compromise was reached with some land obtained.

**ILLNESS, INJURY AND DEATH (3 CASES)**

Two cases (cases 2 and 15) of death in traffic accidents led to collective action which forced monetary compensation to be given to the victims' families. In both cases mobs gathered at the accident scene shortly after the event and held up and damaged vehicles. Then a process of negotiation took place. Strong norms of just compensation and the right to subsistence (for example, of widowed women) come into focus in these events. The action of the mob is instrumental, but also affective, value oriented, and traditional in its motivation – to use Weber's (1922) ideal types of social action. The threat of damage to vehicles leads to compensation being paid by transport companies to the victims of (unfortunately very common) accidents.

In cases 2 and 15 the main bread-winners of households were killed in traffic accidents. It was considered fitting by local people that the bus and truck owners involved in the accidents should provide a substantial lump sum (about Tk. 25000 and Tk.14000 respectively) to provide for the families of the victims. Collective action involving coercive force and the threat of violence by a large group of people was used to force a settlement negotiated with the chairman and a member, and, in case 2, the police.

In case 8 included here, a teenage girl was blinded after a reaction to bad medicine given by a qualified doctor to treat a fever. Most of the 'collective' measures taken to try to attain adequate medical care were carried out by relatives, which included blood donated by her father and her uncle, raising money to pay for treatment, and extensive search of alternative treatment from many places. Her extended family sought alternative medical care from a sequence of at least 12 different doctors in various hospitals and clinics and two traditional healers (*kobiraj*). The family estimate that about Tk. 120,000 was spent on seeking treatment, including the mortgage of cultivatable land. The girl is permanently blinded and is still living with her parents.

**Table 3: Cases involving illness, injury or death**

Case	District	Nature of incident	Year	Major actors/intermediaries	Form and extent of resolution and other outcomes
2	Jessore	Death of a poor man in a road accident led to collective protest and compensation for his family. A mob of local people damaged the bus and other vehicles. The local police-officer-in-charge (OC) and UP chairman negotiated a settlement with monetary compensation given to the widow and her children.	2000	Relatives and neighbors, Officer in Charge (OC) at the police station, UP chairman and members, business people.	Monetary compensation given to family from bus company, police OC and local community. Sons withdrawn from school due to poverty.
8	Kishoreganj	Teenage girl blinded after a reaction to poor medical treatment for a fever. Most of the measures taken were carried out by relatives.	2000	Doctors, <i>kobiraj</i>	The girl is living with her father.
15	Manikganj	Deaths of two brothers in traffic accident. Monetary compensation given after collective lobbying by UP chairman, relatives, and neighbors. Marriages were arranged for the widows by relatives and local leaders.	2007	Relatives, neighbors, UP chairman, ex-chairman.	The widows were given Tk. 7000 each by the bus company, and their marriages were arranged using this money as dowry.

## **THEFT AND CHEATING (2 CASES)**

The cases in Table 4 below were caused by a theft (case 1) from a local shop and fraud (case 2) during arrangements for a migrant labor visa by an agent. In case 1, burglary of a small shop led to a wider village conflict and violence. One faction in the village pressured the victim to take out a court-case against their enemy, and later other villagers persuaded the victim to withdraw the case. A violent clash ensued with injury and hospitalization and further court-cases taken out. A village collection was organized by local leaders, and the victim was compensated for the theft because he was considered poor and disabled. Large numbers of villagers were involved in this case, and local government officials were pressured to coordinate a just outcome in conjunction with the police.

In case 5 arrangements were made for labor migration overseas, but false visas supplied by an agent led to local conflict and court cases. The victim has suffered a large monetary loss (more than Tk. 100,000). Attempts were made by a group of friends and relatives to catch the agent with help from a chairman and a relative who was in the army. The agent has so far managed to avoid being forced to return the money he cheated from the victim.

**Table 4: Cases involving theft and cheating**

<b>Case</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Nature of incident</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Major actors/ intermediaries</b>	<b>Form and extent of resolution and other outcomes</b>
1	Jessore	Burglary of a small shop led to a wider village conflict and violence. One faction in the village pressured the victim to take out a court-case against their enemy. Other villagers persuaded the victim to withdraw the case. A violent clash ensued with injury and hospitalization and further court-cases taken out. A village collection was organized by local leaders, and the victim was compensated for the theft because he was considered poor and disabled.	2006	Shopkeeper, villagers, local police, Union Parishad chairman and members.	<i>Shalish</i> , unresolved court cases.
5	Jessore	Arrangements for labor migration overseas. False visas supplied by an agent leading to financial loss, local conflict, and court cases.	2003	Union Parishad chairman, Police, Army.	Court cases continue, no resolution or restitution.

## **KEY ACTORS AND INTERMEDIARIES IN EVERYDAY FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Union Parishad chairs and members were key actors in most of the collective action incidents identified. They presided over *shalish* hearings which were sometimes held in the house of the chairman or in the Union Parishad offices (in case 1 it was

held in a school playground). They also we called on for signatures when police cases were withdrawn, organized village collections, negotiated with the police, and made sure hospital treatment was given. In case 1 the chairman talked to doctors on behalf of one of the injured villagers before arranging for a CT scan to be carried out in Khulna. Mobile phones facilitated much of this communication. UP chairs and members also arranged marriages in cases 1 and 2.

*Matbars* were also active in these events, but their power seems less effectual than in the past.<sup>11</sup> Leaders who had links to political parties, the police, army, or business were more influential than other *matbars* who did not hold the same power-resources.

In many events large numbers of villagers were involved. In case 1, up to 70 villagers went together to get a signature from the chairman so that a false case could be withdrawn from the police; in case 3 between 100 and 150 people were present at the *shalish* held in the UP office to resolve problems caused by the elopement of a boy and a girl; and in cases 7 and 9, 50-60 people attended *shalishes* in attempts to resolve land disputes.

In only one case (case 10) NGO workers were involved, when hospital arrangements in Dhaka were made for the acid attack victim. However, NGOs and NGO workers were not included in many of the other collective action events explored. It seems that NGOs operated outside the local structures of power which village people negotiated in struggles for justice, resolution of conflict, compensation, or access to scarce resources such as land. There has been much debate in the literature (for example, Kabeer 2001, Kabeer 2003, Lewis 2004, Devine 2006) over the empowerment potential of NGO activities including micro-finance loans to poor rural Bangladeshis. This study suggests that the NGO-based micro-finance provided in the villages studied had little relationship with the more everyday forms of collective action.

The police were key actors in investigating incidents when a 'case' had been logged with them either as a general diary entry (GD) or when the First Information Report (FIR) was made. In some cases, police action was coordinated in cooperation with the UP chair. In case 1 the police accepted the withdrawal of a case once a signature was gained from the UP chair and member. In case 7 the officer-in-charge (OC) of the local police station negotiated monetary compensation for a widow of a traffic accident victim from the transport company.

## **SOCIAL NORMS AND EVERYDAY FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**

At least four categories of sets of social norms can be identified in the reports of the cases examined. These can be linked to respectability, justice, reciprocity, and subsistence.

People who were deemed respectable presided over *shalishes*, and disregarding a *shalish* was seen to be breaking social norms of respectable behavior. In addition, the protection of the good name of girls was a high priority with implications for their marriageability. The protection of a good name or social

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<sup>11</sup> This impression is also supported by Lewis and Hossain (2008) where they report on the diminishing influence of *matbars* in village disputes (p42).

prestige (*bhalo nam, man shonman*) is one outcome sought in episodes of collective action. Social standing has wider economic and social consequences for a family – thus the quick marriage of a daughter whose reputation has been compromised was seen as essential to protect her own and her family's reputation. A family with a poor reputation can be disadvantaged in various ways in the labor market, business dealings, further marriage negotiations, and physical insecurity.

Achieving justice was seen as important and collectively perceived injustice can sometimes lead to spontaneous outbreaks of collective action. The extreme of this is displayed in uncontrollable mob violence at the scene of traffic accidents (cases 2 and 15). Although some may argue that mob action falls outside the purview of collective action as it is normally defined, it clearly has instrumental significance for the group involved. Local people congregated at the scene of accidents and acted in order to achieve compensation for any victims, partly due to a widespread lack of confidence in formal judicial procedures. This forced vehicle owners to settle compensation quickly, and, when an acceptable settlement was agreed, the mob dispersed. The need for justice was also sought in *shalishes* over land disputes and in compensation for victims of violence.

Reciprocity in relationships was linked to the norms associated with justice and fairness and also to the recognition of the need for subsistence (what James Scott refers to as the 'subsistence ethic' (Scott 1976)). When a person was seen as poor and respectable, special arrangements were made by leaders such as the UP chairman to protect their ability to survive. This norm is demonstrated in land disputes where the need for homestead land was protected (case 13); it was also demonstrated in cases when a collection was made for a poor victim of crime (case 1) or after accidents (case 2). This points to the important role collective action plays in the formation of a system of informal social protection. Support is coordinated by local leaders, and help is collected from a large number of local people. It is common for a recently widowed woman, for example, to find sacks of rice delivered to her house arranged through a village collection.

Norms of reciprocity are also key in the relationship between Union Parishad chairs and members and the villagers who had elected them into office. These actors were aware that they had entered an electoral bargain with the villagers and were keen to be seen as intermediaries in issues that affect the wellbeing in their constituencies. Their resources to achieve these ends include the ability to preside in *shalishes* and also to be able to nominate recipients of official social protection resources such as the Vulnerable Groups Development (VGD) program, the Allowances for Widows and Distressed Women, and Old Age Allowances.

Social changes in Bangladesh influence the nature of observed collective action. Mobile phones now play a very important role in organizing and communicating with key actors. Gender roles are evolving with many more women working in urban areas, particularly in garments factories around Dhaka, and both international and national labor migration featured strongly in the stories we analyzed.

## **SOCIAL POWER AND EVERYDAY FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**

In these collective actions and struggles various forms of social power were both at stake and deployed, and had constitutive as well as instrumental significance. We

can refer to these forms of power as 'power-resources' because the term best captures the way that social power is intertwined with economic resources.<sup>12</sup> Power-resources can be categorized in various ways; in these cases they seemed to fall into four broad categories:

1. Economic power-resources;
2. Political and coercive power-resources;
3. Bureaucratic and knowledge-related power-resources;
4. Social network and social prestige power-resources.

In these case studies, collective struggles tended to be over power-resources that were economic (in the case of land disputes, compensation for accidents, and theft and cheating) or related to maintaining social status and respectability (particularly in the marriage, divorce, and dowry-related events). Political, bureaucratic, knowledge, and social network-based power-resources were tactically deployed and assumed a more instrumental significance. Men and women were skilled in negotiating this environment of power, and collective action was instrumental in influencing outcomes.

When villagers sought help from UP chairs, members, and other influential actors, they were aware of the power-resources held by these people and of their instrumental significance. For example, in case 1 when the police came to the village to arrest someone falsely accused of the theft, villagers phoned an ex-chairman, who then talked to the current chairman, who in turn talked to the police. In case 2 the member, chairman, and the OC of the police station negotiated a compensation settlement from the bus company for the accident victim's family. All these settlements were associated with collective mobilization by villagers.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The events explored in the fifteen case studies were complex, and often one episode led to another making the beginning and end points of an event difficult to identify. The events open a window on the way that local structures of power work and how effective various currencies of power are. They also throw light on values held and on what happens when injustice or unrespectable behavior is seen to have taken place. Collective action pressured local leaders to act to seek redress or compensation, to settle disputes, and to protect vulnerable victims of accidents or crime. Local arbitration through the *shalish* emerged as a key institution within episodes of collective action. However, the types of collective action that took place seem to have ambiguous outcomes for poor and marginalized people, and, in many cases, reinforced patriarchal norms that deal with dowry, early marriage, and the prevention of sexual relations outside of marriage, even if the solution involved child marriage. The collective action episodes were also mainly spontaneous,

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<sup>12</sup> Power-resources theory has been developed by researchers studying the political economy of welfare states, but is a useful way of conceptualizing various currencies of power as they are deployed in village settings (see Korpi 1985 and O'Connor et al. 1998).

seemed to be catalyzed by disruptive events, and usually involved groups of people attempting to exert influence within local power structures.

The cases suggest that the often-celebrated role of NGOs in local collective action needs to be placed in a context where other more significant and more common forms of collective activity occur spontaneously and informally, with significant impact on peoples' wellbeing, but with ambiguous outcomes for some poor people involved. This is a different picture from what is usually seen in Bangladesh, due to the visibility of NGOs, particularly to outsiders. Local government elected chairs and members played a key role in these events which often included local arbitration or *shalish* hearings. A deeper understanding of how collective disputes and struggles are commonly managed in everyday life should help us to hold a more realistic view of the empowerment potential of interventions aimed at fostering collective action in Bangladesh.

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