Personal skills and social action -
Adult literacy in the FIVDB strategy

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November 2013
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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

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<td>ADAB</td>
<td>Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh</td>
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<td>ADRA</td>
<td>Adventist Development and Relief Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome</td>
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<tr>
<td>BARD</td>
<td>Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBS</td>
<td>Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>BIDS</td>
<td>Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>BNFE</td>
<td>Bureau of Non-Formal Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>BRAC</td>
<td>A Bangladeshi development NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMPE</td>
<td>Campaign for Popular Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCDB</td>
<td>Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>A Bangladeshi development NGO centered on Kushtia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLC</td>
<td>Community Learning Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIVDB</td>
<td>Friends In Village Development Bangladesh</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human immunodeficiency virus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IVS</td>
<td>International Voluntary Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OXFAM</td>
<td>An international confederation of relief, development and advocacy NGOs</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLCEHD</td>
<td>Post-Literacy and Continuing Education Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>REFLECT</td>
<td>Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>Short message service</td>
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<tr>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Traditional birth attendant</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
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Preface

By the Executive Director

In 1976 when I joined International Voluntary Services (IVS) the first book was given to me to read as a task by the Country Director was “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” by Paulo Freire. I did not have any background in Philosophy or Psychology and, therefore, found the book very difficult to read and understand. With the help of dictionaries and some knowledgeable friends I did manage to read the book. For me Freire opened a new window for understanding the realities of the world and a potential process of transforming it. This book left a profound impact on me.

Later James Jennings joined us as a volunteer. He had his background in Education and was proficient in Bangla. He and his team in 1981, the early days of FIVDB, started working on developing an adult literacy course for villagers of Sylhet. I was closely associated with the process. Every day they used to develop a lesson, field-test it in two classes and then revise it. This arduous process continued for months. By the middle of 1982 the team completed the development of the course materials following field-testing and an extended piloting of the learning materials.

The aim was to develop a set of learning materials that village volunteers in rural areas of Sylhet would be capable of using, and from which the learners could easily attain competencies in basic reading, writing, counting and social skills. The Freirean psycho-social approach to learning along with an eclectic methodology was used in developing the materials.

The learning materials were first introduced in the field areas in Sylhet. However, the methodology gradually became very popular and was widely used by development agencies in mid 1980’s and 90’s. Over three hundred organizations have used the
learning materials, and about 2.6 million learners have attended the course. FIVDB has also worked in the domain of post-literacy, continuing education and lifelong learning.

From the late 1990's the use of adult literacy materials gradually declined, and now fewer agencies implement adult literacy in Bangladesh. However, FIVDB has continued its efforts in adult learning even though the funding support for it has radically declined. We in FIVDB believe that along with universal primary education an ample provision for adult and lifelong learning should be part of any educational strategy to effectively fight the forces of illiteracy, underdevelopment and poverty.

The literacy activities have evolved through a process of learning from the field. Few formal studies were undertaken except for the initial extensive research conducted by Dr. James Jennings and for occasional evaluations. The present study has been undertaken to grasp what has worked, what has not, why so, and to explore its potential future. We know from our field observation that the learners to a varied degree have learnt reading, writing and mathematical skills. Awareness related to health, nutrition and hygienic issues has been raised. But critical awareness in socio-political issues leading to social action and movement has not been effectively enhanced. We hope that this study will help us in discerning a path for literacy work with greater knowledge and understanding.

I take this opportunity to thank our advisor Dr. Aldo Benini for providing leadership for this important research work. Thanks are also due to Wasima Samad Chowdhury, Rakshit Bhattacharjee, Mashiur Rahman Tito and other colleagues for their contribution and assistance. We are grateful to the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for their generous support.

I hope this study will be useful for researchers, development practitioners and policy formulators.

Zahin Ahmed

3 November 2013
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Effective connections with former learners and teachers as well as with key persons of case studies were made by our colleagues:

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Important information on the history and current structure of the program was provided by:


Photos were contributed also by these FIVDB staff members:

Rakshit Bhattacharjee, Arif Azad Khan, Usman Gani, Dipak Roy.

A large number of unnamed subject-matter program staff as well as members of village-based Community Learning Centers were involved in the initial baseline survey of the Jonoshilon project. Some of this data was re-used for this study.

The research was supported by FIVDB.
Summary

The occasion

Friends in Village Development, Bangladesh (FIVDB) has trained adults to read, write and calculate for over three decades. Work was started in the days of its predecessor organization, the International Voluntary Service, around 1977, and has been continued since FIVDB's formal establishment in 1981. Its competency in adult literacy is recognized nationally, with dozens of United Nations, government and NGO programs using its training materials. FIVDB has kept delivering literacy training in its working area long after donors switched priorities to child education support in the 1990s. After 2008, it scaled up these activities under a popular education program known as "Jonoshilon", organizing classes through locally run "Community Learning Centers", in close to 700 villages in eight districts. In 2012, 13,283 learners completed their basic literacy training, and 855 new classes were begun.

The Jonoshilon program will end in December 2013. This and the vastly changed environment of literacy and education in Bangladesh motivate a review of the "FIVDB literacy package". This study was undertaken to provide a retrospective as well as elements of orientation to guide future work in literacy and adjacent domains. Members of FIVDB's Policy, Planning and Research Unit, together with a consultant supporting monitoring and research functions in Jonoshilon, have been working on it intermittently since 2012. This is the first detailed study of FIVDB's adult literacy program after one of its pioneers wrote a doctoral dissertation on it (Jennings 1990).

The perspective

We have sought a sufficiently abstract perspective in order to relate FIVDB's experience to wider debates on literacy and development. At the same time, the framework must facilitate attribution and interpretation of program evolution and program outcomes, some of which can be described only with specific local references. For a point of departure helpful to join empirical observations to interpretive frames, we chose an observation by Amartya Sen:

"Illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves. Not to be able to read or write or count or communicate is itself a terrible deprivation. And if a person is thus reduced by illiteracy and innumeracy, we can not only see that the person is insecure to whom something terrible could happen, but more immediately, that to him or her, something terrible has actually happened".

Hence we lead the reader through - necessarily incomplete - references to debates on literacy and literacy training. These touch on literate / illiterate as neatly defined social status, the social and situational diversity of literacies rather than one monolithic literacy, the distinction between the forced child student and the voluntary adult learner, poverty as obstacle to, and engine of, literacy, literacy and well-being, and the disputed effectiveness of adult literacy training.
Above all, however, we note the philosophical antecedents of FIVDB's literacy work. From its inception, this NGO has been inspired by Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", which projects literacy as an instrument of liberation. Freire held considerable sway over the development community in the 1970s and 1980s. The degree to which his worldview and didactic precepts have subsequently been transformed and routinized is an empirical question. We address it as far as FIVDB is concerned. Regardless, the belief that "learning to 'read the word' is a prerequisite for 'reading the world'" has continuously given direction to FIVDB's own perception and management of adult literacy training. As a corollary, literacy is a dual-purpose technology: it gives individuals skills to manipulate signs; it supports deliberation of collective actions.

**Literacy environment**

Thus equipped, the study approaches the literacy environment of Bangladesh. For this country too, the connection between literacy and well-being has been confirmed; literacy's contribution to longevity is particularly strong in women. A key statistic is the rate of adult literacy; a test-based survey in 2008 estimated that 49 percent - half of the adults - were literate. The proportion of primary school completers who could be considered literate was 68 percent. In other words, one third had relapsed into semi- or illiteracy. These few figures stake out the territory for adult literacy training: a large population potentially benefitting from training and re-training; a substantial risk that the skills remain ephemeral. A related survey of literacy usage established that less than half of the population five years or older ever performed simple reading operations, with a steep gradient down to the low frequencies at which more demanding reading and writing tasks were undertaken. The majority, it seems, coped without routine literate activities.

**Structure of the report**

The story and analysis of the FIVDB adult literacy experience proceed against that backdrop. We devote a chapter to its long history, of which FIVDB's own organizational memory informs us. Then we let the learners and facilitators speak to their own experience. We approached them through three data collections. First, qualitative interviews with 48 learners and facilitators from the period 1983 - 1997 paint a canvas of struggles for the freedom to learn in the 1980s and 90s when dominant elements of a largely illiterate rural society were opposing the format, if not the very idea, of adult literacy training. Second, approx. 260 recent learners shared their private beliefs of literacy competencies, revealing distinct motivational and skills clusters. Third, 33 CLCs participated in a budget simulation in which they allocated fictitious development funds to projects of their choice, including literacy training. Not all in the audience were trainees or trainers themselves; thus the CLC simulations reveal something of the public appreciation of literacy training. And eventually we used the scores that tests at the end of the eight-month training course returned for approx. 2,000 learners - a bureaucratic device, if you will, by which FIVDB attempts to grasp the outcome of the literacy training program.
History of the program

For this summary, the findings are condensed and selective. The history of the program can be recast in a three-period scheme. In a first period, roughly until 1982, FIVDB created an organizational identity around literacy training. It was followed by a phase of expansion and public recognition (1982 - 2001). Contraction and reorientation defined the third phase, with adult literacy finding a new home inside a social organization innovation, the village-based Community Learning Centers (CLCs). It has continued to the time of this writing, in 2013.

Over the years and across periods, two decisions proved particularly fortuitous. In 1980, rather than relying on materials and methods of other organizations, FIVDB created its own adult literacy program, complete with new curriculum, materials and dedicated staff. This enabled adjustments to field needs as well as profiling in the national arena as a provider in its own right, with its roster of volunteer teachers growing in the northeast and with materials development and supply units in Dhaka looking after its multiplying partners. In 1988, FIVDB started building "People's Organizations" in the villages, with checkered results and a long-drawn process of reformulation, from which, by 2000, the first CLCs emerged. They provided a template for the fusion of grassroots organization and literacy training, rapidly replicated under Jonoshilon. By 2012, FIVDB was working with 690 CLCs. Both processes helped FIVDB recognize post-literacy needs early and to create materials and courses to meet some of them.

Program effects

In the early years, facilitators and learners struggled to be accepted as autonomous groups, meeting and sharing on their own terms. Many, in their desire to overcome the stigma of illiteracy, put personal dignity before social convention and family honor. They initially met with considerable resistance, which, in most areas, gradually melted away. In Sen's terms, insecurity reduction was a constant driver - the hope that literacy would prevent cheating over land deeds, payment of wages, or relief distributions. Several interviewees stressed how the new skills gave them the confidence to move in the public sphere, open bank accounts, and find the right places in large office buildings and hospitals. Their new literacy helped to reduce dependency on others; some learners even became resource persons for written communications in their localities.

The volume and diversity of reading and particularly of writing by the early learners remained modest. Many, by their own admission, relapsed into states of illiteracy. Insufficient training and practice likely played their part; yet the accounts of how literacy tasks were shared among family members suggest a different explanation. We argue for the confluence of age and period effects: Age brought poor eyesight and increasing disengagement from leading roles in household and business. Meanwhile expanding education in the country benefitted children who would grow up and bring home educated spouses. A frequent transfer of responsibility, including for literacy tasks, took place, epitomized by the new daughter-in-law moving in with a secondary school certificate and taking over the accounts of the small family business. While this causal mechanism worked at a particular historic juncture, obviously it has no bearing on the general question of training effectiveness.
Similar reservations hold for the social awareness effects that FIVDB expected of Paulo Freire's pedagogy and its implementation in materials and methods stimulating democratic debate in the rural society of Bangladesh. The early trainees and facilitators agreed that literacy had propelled conceptual and behavioral changes in three areas: personal hygiene and sanitation; health (child vaccinations, rejection of village quacks) and the education of all children - boys and girls - through primary school and, where finances permitted, lower secondary. These are individual and household effects that the larger society rewarded and reinforced by the expansion of services such as the near-universal tubewell coverage. Outside those realms, however, there are no indications that adult literacy training - by FIVDB or others - left durable traces in social awareness or even fostered social movements. The absence is particularly noticeable in a rights-based perspective; dowry, a prominent topic in classes in the 1980s, is hardly remembered. Freire's pedagogy, in its local translations, stimulated change that remained specific and personal, rather than broad and political.

**Current demand**

Over time, Bangladeshi society has become more complex and more diverse. Among the more recent learners, distinct motivational and usage clusters can be made out. There are those content to be able to sign their names and to make simple calculations, chiefly - one presumes - as a defense against stigma and cheating. Women in particular enroll in order to better help their children with homework, deal with school authorities and thus delay the need for private tutoring. A minority of the learners are more business or job-oriented, as seen in the importance that they place on the skills to operate mobile phones and handle official documents. Our method does not allow us to qualify these motivations as purely private - supervision of students may go hand in hand with middle-class demands for quality education -, but they do establish a degree of diversity at odds with the Freirean vision of unity in spirit and deed.

As for the public appreciation of adult literacy training, the budget simulation exercise with 33 CLCs was revealing. Three things stood out: Adult literacy and child education were in sharp opposition; very few CLCs wanted to invest in both. Literacy training showed a significant affinity to health care, which is not surprising when we think back to the emphasis that already the early learners and facilitators had given to this sector. Overall, adult literacy training appeared to be a minority concern. This needs to be qualified; in the exercise middle-class and male participants tended to favor infrastructure projects whereas literacy training was proposed as a budget item more often by poorer and female speakers. Many CLC executive councils are dominated by educated middle or upper-class males; they are not above filtering the preferences of the poorer rank-and-file.

FIVDB has been administering a standardized test at the end of the basic literacy training to measure the newly acquired skills in reading, writing, and social awareness. Insiders have doubted the quality of the testing, particularly of the social awareness part. It is not obvious what kinds of decisions were informed by the test results. At least once, the confirmation by the test results that writing skills were poor motivated a curriculum
revision. Overall, the literacy planners and supervisors were so absorbed with operational issues that the known problems of the test were not fixed during the Jonoshilon period.

This study took advantage of a subsample of nearly 2,000 learners tested in 2011 whom we could link to Jonoshilon baseline survey records. Statistical estimates suggest that personal characteristics - days attended during the course, prior literacy - had stronger effects on the test scores than household poverty and the literacy rate in the village. Also, the social awareness scores were much less responsive to those factors than the scores of the technical subjects. This may mean one of two things: over time, the actual training practice has atrophied to purely technical skills, or FIVDB has greater difficulty observing and describing social awareness among poor communities.

Where are we now?

As a blanket statement, that would not be fair. The philosophical impulse that the fledgling FIVDB received from Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is still active in the organization, to this day. The literacy program is helping some of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society to find their voice and then, within the limits that culture and power set, to be heard. But Freire is not a household word in the CLCs that run classes, nor among the younger fieldworkers who support their efforts. His tenets have been routinized in materials and schedules. These define a series of social awareness-related activities during training; they also provide optional content during post-literacy - no more, no less.

The dream that adult literacy would lend wings to social movements among the poor has not come true. Rather, routinization has enabled periodic revisions of syllabi, thus allowing the training to go with the flow of times, exposing learners of low literacy backgrounds to new topics, issues and cognitive operations. The training has settled on a domesticated, yet enlightened platform. The CLCs themselves are the product of a long and careful trial-and-error process. Whether Freire would have approved of them nobody knows. Yet his impulse has been surprisingly long-lasting.

The same can be said of the donor support for FIVDB's adult literacy program. While funding at times fluctuated, overall the donors have kept this line of work going for more than thirty years. A self-reinforcing mechanism was at play. Good results motivated continued funding, and solid funding allowed FIVDB to continue expanding the program. This is not entirely positive. The favorable funding delayed the need for more radical innovation. FIVDB has barely begun to explore the implications of the new media. The program now needs new ideas, at a time when its funding may sharply contract. There is no one big idea on the horizon, in contrast to the intellectual explosion that Freire's ideas set off in the 1980s. There are numerous valuable and proven elements waiting to be recombined and complemented with new ones yet to be discovered.

Future orientations

The current social environment does not support the Freirean approach well. The technical side of literacy training has largely migrated to the formal education system.
Social awareness formation is being driven by the new media of television and mobile phones, and plausibly also by the echoes from urban and international migration.

The Freirean approach had kept those two sides closely integrated. The same held for content creation and delivery. FIVDB was the sole provider in its working area, and only recently did the CLCs take on a more substantial role in literacy training. In future, there will be greater flexibility needed. Content creation can be separated from FIVDB's delivery formats. To an extent, this is already happening, with FIVDB creating materials for other agencies that it may never utilize in its own field. Separate content creation will permit more rapid adaptation to changes in the ambient society although this may also come with its own order of integration problems. Instead of organizing only the slow eight-month courses, CLCs may host a greater diversity of shorter, more specifically themed literacy events. One can think of a variety of modular short courses, some taught by specialized instructors.

The big challenge is to replace Freire's "learn to read the word in order to read the world" with a new organizing formula. There are more people who can "read the word"; however, the ability to "read the world" has not grown apace. The new formula must be powerful enough to motivate all stakeholders that by following it something of value can be created. At the same time, it must be discriminating enough to guide what to select into the curriculum, and what not.

One of the formulas that FIVDB literacy workers have considered is "lifelong learning". In a general perspective this is appropriate - who would not agree that everyone should be helped to learn during the full life course? -, but it is not sufficiently discriminating, and in particular leaves us in the dark as to how poor and marginalized persons actually learn.

Instead we recommend a formula that ties back to the Bangla words for literate (শাক্ষর, shakkhor) and signature (শাক্ষর, shakkhor), and to the concept of basic literacy, which many poor people define as the ability to sign one's name. Putting one's signature on a paper document is an empowering act. In an enlarged version of shakkhor, literacy training creates specific communicative competencies that enable learners to open doors of opportunity. Opening these doors may be seen in analogy to digital signatures, and the curriculum design in analogy to hacking - stubbornly trying combinations until the door opens. Thus, in this formula, literacy is a collection of keys that open new doors to the world - the keys have to be found while working on the doors.

For the design of adult literacy training, the images of doors and keys have the advantage of forcing hard thinking:

- To which parts of the world do the learners need access?
- Where is the locked door that keeps them out?
- Are there any keys that will open that door? Does literacy have any?
- How does the key have to be cut precisely?
The idea of "literacy as a collection of keys" may strike some as overly technical (digital keys), kowtowing to a capitalist icon (the credit card) and certainly falling short of Freire's vision. Freire, after all, wanted to open the whole world for the oppressed, not a set of minor opportunities enumerated in some curriculum. The world, it turns out, is a moving horizon - it ever keeps moving away from us as we move towards it. Doors resist, and keys fit or fail. By opening doors with the keys of literacy, FIVDB changes the world at least a little bit.

[Sidebar:] At a glance - The adult literacy program in 2012

The basic set-up of the program can be summarized in a few organizational features. Learners meet in gender-specific classes at a rhythm that they decide, with 350 training hours to be covered in eight months. The curriculum is fixed and follows three "primers" (textbooks). Every class initially is filled with 20 learners and is taught by a volunteer known as shebok (male) or shebika (female). The teachers must have at least eight years of education. They are appointed by the local CLC, which also decides the venue, and receive training and a stipend from FIVDB.

In 2012, FIVDB supported literacy classes in all eight districts of the Jonoshilon working area, depicted in this map. The CLCs - there were 691 of them - started 855 new classes. Of the 13,283 learners completing their training during the year, the vast majority (92 percent) were women. Many completers had begun the training in 2011; the exact drop-out rate is difficult to compute for the year. For the period 2009-2012, assuming all learners had started in the respective preceding year, the estimated rate is 13 percent.

The support structure related to adult literacy training and the CLCs employed a staff of 183 workers. Thirty worked in the Sylhet head office and in the Dhaka material development and support unit. The other 153 - 122 frontline Program Organizers and 31 supervisory staff - were based in the field, supporting literacy classes as well as working with the CLCs on other matters, notably liaising with the livelihood skills trainings.
Figure 1: Map of the Jonoshilon working area
Chapter 1: Introduction

FIVDB has been conducting adult literacy courses since the days of its predecessor organization, the International Voluntary Services (IVS), and has continued them ever since its formal inception in 1981. In these roughly thirty years, FIVDB literacy materials were improved in several waves of review and revision, used by several dozen adult literacy providers in Bangladesh, and translated and adapted to other environments as far as India and Yemen.

This expansion has not been linear; FIVDB's own training output fluctuated, chiefly in response to funding constraints. Paradoxically, during its long expansion phase in the 1990s when the number of learners completing the training climbed from about a thousand a year to over three thousand, the international policy climate turned decisively away from supporting adult literacy training. With the usual inertia in policy fields, it was not until 2001 that the donor response affected FIVDB, but then the reduction in its literacy program was dramatic. The program regained its momentum in 2005 and since then increasingly under "Jonoshilon", a large popular education program that the Dutch Embassy in Dhaka funded between 2008 and 2013. But while FIVDB's core competency in adult literacy remains unquestioned, the future of the program remains clouded under funding uncertainty.

FIVDB itself wishes to assess the relevance of what it calls its "literacy package" for its strategic programming. This assessment takes into account the vastly changed task environment. Three changes are conspicuous. The literacy of the Bangladeshi population has grown, primarily as a result of school expansion, to which FIVDB has contributed through its own primary schools. In the media landscape, television and the mobile phone explosion have changed patterns both of oral and of written communication, which makes new demands on literacy curricula. And, aided by the first two developments, the density of rural local institutions has increased, driven by microfinance, but locally also by the Community Learning Centers (CLCs), an innovative institution that FIVDB is supporting in close to 700 villages.

**Structure of the report**

Against that backdrop, the next chapter will look at literacy as a skill that individuals learn and use, but also as a resource that belongs to families, neighborhoods and entire communities, employed to solve collective problems. We review theoretical points, then briefly look at the literacy situation of Bangladesh, and conclude the chapter with pointers for our research strategy.

Chapter 3 tracks the evolution of the adult literacy training program over more than thirty years. Adult literacy has been a cornerstone of FIVDB's corporate identity. It did not fill this function because its outcomes were superior to those of other sector programs. Rather, literacy training found a firm philosophical grounding in an external source, Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", and as such enjoyed greater standing with partner organizations. Over time, and in the Bangladeshi conditions, Freire's
revolutionary impetus was domesticated and routinized in arrangements that suited local realities and FIVDB's capacity.

Chapter 4 reports on our empirical research. Loosely structured interviews with learners and volunteer teachers from the 1980s and '90s let us see a palette of changes that the new literacy wrought in their lives, and also the absence of noticeable impact in areas where FIVDB expected it. We correlate personal changes with some of the societal ones. A preference-revealing exercise with recent learners confirmed distinct motivational and usage clusters, plausibly a reflex of greater diversity in the ambient society. A budget simulation exercise with a number of CLCs opened a window on the public preferences for literacy training versus other possible community projects. Finally we link end-of-training test scores to baseline survey data to gauge the effects of learning / teaching against those of poverty and ambient literacy.

Chapter 5 proposes elements to be considered for the future of adult literacy training in FIVDB.

**Gaps and future work**

The reader will certainly find major gaps that the study leaves open. We note two. Our data are not good enough to relate specific uses of literacy to personal or community characteristics. This is all the more regrettable because we did identify distinct preference and usage clusters. Our models, however, did not produce much new insight about what social actors use their new skills for what particular purposes or situations.

Second, we failed to do justice to the diversity and dynamics of the CLCs. These institutions have been key to FIVDB's literacy training efforts in recent years. Although their interface with FIVDB structurally is not too different from the usual grassroots-NGO transition zone, the CLCs are not passive conveyor belts. They are active partners with their own minds, with a well defined role in basic training, with variable participation in post-literacy activities, and with diverse forays into broader village development. Some years after Jonoshilon, other researchers may want to return to the CLCs, to find a stimulating topic in organizational sustainability.

Throughout this study, we use the term "literacy" as encompassing reading, writing as well as numeracy. We distinguish literacy from the knowledge of numbers, counting and arithmetic operations only when the situation or stylistic variety so require.
Chapter 2: Adult literacy - Global theories, Bangladeshi realities

Literacy and human development

During a program review in the year 2000, a participant of FIVDB's adult literacy program evoked a panic attack that she had suffered in her illiterate days. At one point while traveling with her little daughter, she left the girl in their coach in order to buy some food. She lost her way in the vast urban terminal. Unable to read bus numbers and destination signs, and faced with the general indifference of those she asked for directions, she erred up and down the rows of buses, fearing hers might pull out before she could rejoin her daughter. She eventually did find her, but the anguish remained so deeply engrained in her mind that she described the episode as typical of the embarrassment, terror and dependency that afflict those unable to read.

Literacy as security

Insecurity is a direct consequence of illiteracy in a social world dominated by the literate. The effect is so pervasive, so cruel that Amartya Sen, in his recasting of human development as a set of capabilities, rates illiterate persons as already afflicted by something terrible:

"Illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves. Not to be able to read or write or count or communicate is itself a terrible deprivation. And if a person is thus reduced by illiteracy and innumeracy, we can not only see that the person is insecure to whom something terrible could happen, but more immediately, that to him or her, something terrible has actually happened" (Sen 2003: 22, as quoted by Maddox 2011).

Literacy thus occupies a fundamental place among the forces of human development, perhaps surprisingly so in the eyes of some who may think that the fulfillment of basic needs such as for food and shelter ranks higher, and that literacy only has a derived or instrumental value. True, a hungry man cannot be sated with ink and paper, but in the wider context of his capacity to be and to do, illiteracy cripples, while literacy gives wings.

Not by accident, the adult literacy rate at the country level is one of the indicators of which the Human Development Index was initially composed (Anand and Sen 1994; Wikipedia 2012b). The fact that the education component of the index, starting in 2011, replaced adult education in favor of years of schooling is a setback for the adult literacy community. It underlines the low status that adult education in general has enjoyed, historically and structurally, within the wider education community (Purvis 1976). We will see parallels to this process in the key partners of FIVDB's literacy program, the changing preferences among Community Learning Center members.
Reasoning about literacy

In this section, we develop theoretical elements about literacy on several lines, gradually approaching adult literacy and adult literacy training. First, the incident in the bus terminal illustrates the operation of literacy across levels of social organization - the relationship between individual and written signs, between her and others of varying literacy, between her and the organization exposing participants to writings, and finally between her and the wider society. Society sets expectations of literacy, is ruled mostly by literate persons, and uses language and technical media patterned by literacy, even in image and audio messages. TV images are overlaid with text, and news speakers read from written text using grammar and vocabulary that are distinct from conversational styles.

Literacies, plural

Second, in talking about literacy we face a paradox. Being literate is an acquired, portable skill, detached from specific origins, reusable in new contexts. However, the simple distinction between literate and illiterate persons does not hold. This is not only a matter of degree, in the sense of educational grades on a continuum from totally illiterate to sufficiently literate. Literacy is used in ways that depend on situations and institutional settings, and its skills are differentiated by them. Maddox (2001) demonstrated this for the fish merchants and town clerks in the city of Nilphamari, northern Bangladesh. The skills and practices of swift dealing with creditors and debtors in the marketplace are not the same as those required by proper administrative form in slow-moving bureaucracies. The merchant and the clerk, no matter how clever in their trades, cannot substitute their particular literacies for each other.

Yet, intuitively, we know that literacy promotes conceptual abstraction and thus the mobility of the literate across contexts and institutions. The illiterate remain captive to their stunted capacities to be and to do, or, if that is too harsh a conclusion, at least dependent on those who afford them the minimal mediation with the literate world. In other words, literacy research struggles with the paradox of the clear-cut binary distinction between literate and illiterate versus the diversity of special skills and situated uses in everyday life.

There may be a dozen distinct, hard-to-compare literacies in a place like Nilphamari, but at the end of the day we want to know the percentage of its population that can read and write, and compare it to those of Rangpur, the nearby regional center, or to the capital city of Dhaka, or far-away London. The binary distinction gives way to more finely graded perceptions through personal acquaintance and in educational settings, but still persists in other face-to-face interactions, formal organizations, and entire societies. If you bring a literate relative to the land records office to check a record for you, the clerk will infer that you are illiterate. Employers reviewing candidates with no or little education will rate them as illiterate. The adult literacy rates for groups or countries imply that parts of the population are illiterate.
The primacy of schools

Third, most literate persons acquire reading, writing and arithmetic abilities in school. With rare exceptions - perhaps Cuba in the 1960s -, adult literacy campaigns have benefitted a minority of learners only, hardly more than a sideshow to school-based formal education. Historically, universal schooling evolved because informal socialization in households and apprenticeships could no longer prepare new generations for the conceptual demands that social change and mobility imposed. This system operates with the distinction between the child with his unformed personality and the mature adult, focusing on the former in the perspective of preparing his transformation to the latter. Therefore, the bulk of literacy skills in society are acquired in classrooms, with their freedom to learn from fictitious situations, and with their compulsions for teachers and students to conform to their basic roles.

Children and adults

The situation of the adult learner is different. Apart from military conscription (where it still exists, and even then mostly only for men), there are no universal compulsory learning situations for adults in contemporary society. Participation in adult literacy training is voluntary and subject only to availability and opportunity costs. Learning does take place in groups, under the guidance of facilitators who, like school teachers, are more advanced in literacy. The group enjoys an atmosphere of relative freedom to imagine and explore, but the expectations of adult learners limit the infantilized pedagogic delivery of subject matter that children endure in school. Disappointed or impatient participants can quit at any moment. Facilitators do not know better than their learners in all matters of life, unlike the presumption made for teachers. And course designers are torn between the internal logic of the curriculum and the unknown preferences of future learners.

Autonomy of the adult learner

Instead of children subjected to school discipline, the participants in adult literacy courses are autonomous individuals whose life experience, adult responsibilities and utilitarian expectations the training providers must accommodate with their institutional interests. The autonomy of the learners, of course, is limited by extracurricular factors. Notably, many, if not most, of the illiterate candidates are poor; their low social status motivates conformity with the higher-status recruiters, dispensers and backers of literacy courses. Moreover, literacy classes may be seen (and in fact may function) as gateways to benefits that other programs by the same or related organizations offer, in ways that make participation less than entirely voluntary. In a similar vein, learners can be attracted by prospects to enhance existing trade skills with more literacy, or to prepare for positions in civil society or political office. These too are pursuits in which individual aspirations mesh with market and public pressures.

That said, some caution is due about the "adult" in adult literacy. Literacy classes - in actual practice or by specific design - attract also individuals who are neither children nor adults. They are adolescents, or young adults kept in childlike subordination (such as daughters-in-law), or children with premature adult responsibilities (such as elder siblings in orphaned households). The needs and talents of adolescents blur the strict distinction
between the presumed unformed child and the fully socialized adult. Here again we find a continuum of a characteristic while culture and institutional set-up operate with a binary distinction.

**Poverty as obstacle to, and as engine of, literacy**

The autonomy of the learners, we said above, is limited by extracurricular factors. This observation helps us to build bridges to two other strands of reflection. First, the constraints of the learners can themselves become the subject of the literacy curriculum. This is the dominant logic in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Wikipedia 2012c) and others who emphasize literacy teaching as a vehicle for social awareness and an avenue for the oppressed to find voice and unity.

Second, we have so far hardly spoken about poverty in general and conditions in Bangladesh in particular. The fact that numerous adults still need and want literacy training is overwhelmingly caused by poverty - growing up in poor households, in poor countries that cannot provide effective education, or under oppressive regimes that deny it for large sections of society.

*The essence of Freire*

In the Freirean interpretation, literacy has an instrumental value. It is an instrument of freedom. Properly organized, literacy liberates, via enlightened awareness among the oppressed and common action aimed at the oppressor. "*Learning to 'read the word' is a prerequisite for 'reading the world'*," thus Rogers (2001: 206) captures the essence of the approach. Are these ambitions synergetic, or are they in competition with each other? Where is the proper balance to be struck between the technical skills of sign manipulation and the collective deliberations of social actions that the written word can powerfully symbolize?

In a hypothetical example of a cooperative of poor peasants struggling with corrupt practices, the technical interpretation of literacy would aim at equipping members with sufficient understanding of managerial operations so as to carry out effective audits. The members examine contracts, sales documents and account statements. By contrast, seeing literacy as a "political act" demands a change of culture that no longer tolerates malpractices by the society's officers nor by outside business partners. The tension between the two is akin to that between democracy and elite control. Both capacities are needed, the understanding of transactions as well as the will to confront injustice.

Literacy programs do not so much face conflicts over values and principles, as they face pragmatic dilemmas. These concern the allocation of pedagogic effort between content and form, the tuning of confrontational issues at risk of backlash from suspicious local elites, and the inherent difficulty of measuring program effectiveness in an environment of poverty and of limited opportunities for learners to practice the skills learned in class. Doubts about the effectiveness of literacy programs are pervasive, and we will have to revert to the effectiveness questions.
Literacy and well-being

If poverty limits literacy, starting with the exclusion of children from education, and later assigning adults to predominantly clerical vs. manual work, how does the reverse case work? How do advances in literacy push back poverty and increase human well-being?

This is a complex question, particularly in the context of adult literacy programs. Numerous empirical studies document the association between higher levels of education and subsequent well-being. To the extent that this involves the effects of literacy, it concerns literacy originally acquired by children and adolescents. Well-being effects result from various education outcomes, not only literacy. Schools build social intelligence and capital, and educational certificates have selection effects in careers and for privileged treatment in markets and institutions.

That makes it difficult to distill the pure effects of literacy from the social structure in which the education of the young or the training of adults take place. Some researchers measure cognitive skills, through standardized tests, which one may take as a crude approximation of the direct literacy effect. These measures are strongly associated with micro- as well as macro-effects. "The cognitive skills of the population", write Hanushek and Woessmann (2007: 1), "are powerfully related to individual earnings, to the distribution of income, and to economic growth." This is noteworthy for literacy researchers, but we should remind ourselves that these findings are from studies of school quality, not of adult literacy training.

Gains from literacy, in poorer and richer countries.

The well-being effects from adult literacy training may be easier to elucidate through qualitative research. An Australian study of learners identified positive effects across all domains of the OECD well-being indicators, ranging from health through education, employment, leisure time, access to services, the physical and social environments to personal safety (Balatti, Black et al. Undated). Australia is a rich country; positive effects may be more modest the poorer the learners' ambient society. For example, women who had participated in literacy training in Mali, West Africa, continued to lead lives barely distinguishable for those of their illiterate peers (Puchner 2003). Stromquist, studying a government-civil society partnership in adult literacy in Brazil, felt that cognitive "gains from adult literacy classes in general tend to be small" (1997: 137), and that the major achievements occur in self-esteem and the confidence to act.

This again leads to concerns about the effectiveness of literacy training. Before we go there, however, it is helpful to introduce one more concept from the education realm. This is the idea that education has "staying power". Education is a fundamental cause of well-being and exerts this effect throughout life. "Well educated in youth, well guided for life", as one may formulate this intuition. The effect has been demonstrated quantitatively in mortality studies. In the US, the more educated live longer; their mortality rates, from preventable diseases as well as from unpreventable cancers, are lower (Masters, Hummer et al. 2012). There are questions as to how much of this association is a direct education effect, and how much is mediated by income: the better educated have higher incomes, which pay for better health care (Lynch 2006).
...and in Bangladesh

It so happens that a similar study was undertaken in Bangladesh. Mostafa and van Ginneken looked into mortality patterns in over 10,000 elderly persons (60 years and above) in Matlab, whom they followed between 1982 and 1999. They found that literate men were 13 percent less likely to have died during the course of the study than illiterate sample members. This lower risk of death holds after taking into account demographic factors and the socio-economic status of the household. For literate women, the effect was twice as strong; their risk of dying during the period was lower by 26 percent (Mostafa and van Ginneken 2000: 770). The study measured literacy by years of education and thus misclassified subjects who had become literate in adult life, but it is unlikely that adjusting for adult learners would have changed the findings substantially.

If the "staying power" of school-based education is in any way relevant also to adult literacy training, then we have to expect beneficial effects over much longer periods of time than short-term evaluations, conducted at the end of courses or during post-literacy tests shortly thereafter, can reveal.

Effectiveness of adult literacy programs

Investigating the effectiveness in adult literacy programs would seem a natural impulse. But this question was all but answered starting in the 1990s, and perhaps even earlier, upon signals emitted by powerful aid agencies rather than on the basis of consistent evidence, let alone a wide-ranging debate of the values that undergird adult education.

From the late 1990s onwards, "donor agencies have all but abandoned adult literacy" (Abadzi 2012: 1); this implies a lack of funding also for research into program effectiveness. Hostile attitudes towards adult literacy were motivated largely by earlier studies, carried out by United Nations agencies and the World Bank between the 70s and the 90s, that focused on formal skills testing and on the high rates of relapse into illiteracy that the tests established (UNESCO and UNDP 1976; Abadzi 2003). Studies with lesser institutional backing, some of which have challenged the large-scale relapse thesis (Comings 1995; Torres 2008; Nabea 2009), and even some more supportive assessments by World Bank researchers (Lauglo 2001) apparently had little impact on donor policies. The bulk of education funding continued to go into formal education for children and adolescents.

Ineffective learners?

This controversy circles around the persistence of technical competencies, in the classical subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic. It is certainly true that many learners in poor, and particularly in remote rural, communities lack opportunities to regularly practice what they learned in basic literacy classes. The cultivation of stimulating post-literacy environments is justified not least by fears of relapse among isolated learners, even though, as we have seen, these fears may be exaggerated. More importantly, however, adult literacy programs should be expected to have effects that go beyond the direct application of skills learned in class.
Insights from neurology

Still, the risk of relapse into illiteracy has to be taken seriously even when our notion of effectiveness is guided by farther-reaching long-term impacts. It is the merit of Helen Abadzi, a long-term literacy researcher connected with the World Bank, to have marshaled a wealth of findings in the light of psychological learning theories and modern cognitive science (Abadzi 2003; Abadzi 2012). Her work highlights the formidable barriers that neoliterates face on the way to sustainable reading ability. Its value for training providers is in the recognition that the social factors commonly held responsible for drop-out and relapse (poverty, few opportunities to practice, curricula divorced from participants' lives) are only part of the story. Neurological factors, some related to the age at the time of learning the alphabet, prevent part of adult learners from achieving fluent, automatic reading. In terms of effectiveness, the challenge then is finding the optimal balance between the costs and the benefits of more intensive training and of lasting post-literacy support.

Diverse uses of literacy

Beyond the initial acquisition in class and the subsequent improvement or loss of technical skills, effectiveness ideas follow two different lines. First, we can look at the real-life situations that challenge learners to use their literacy skills or to find others who will help if they cannot master the tasks at hand by themselves. This lets us expect a great diversity in the mix of actual usage, depending on social positions, situations and complementary resources. One of the insights that scholars of the so-called New Literacy Studies (Street 2001; Maddox 2007; Esposito, Kebede et al. 2011) have contributed is that there is no linear progression from low performers who master a few basic literate tasks to high performers apt at difficult tasks (complex ideas and documents, detailed written replies).

Rather, there is specialization. A woman gains greater respect in her extended family as someone who reads religious tracts (but does not herself write letters). A man takes the habit of reading newspaper articles to less literate neighbors. Another person is sought out as someone who writes correct business letters. A group of friends in a festival committee year after year produce the signage for the large gatherings. A middle-aged neoliterate assists the much younger, high school-educated accountant of the local cooperative by re-checking calculations. The diverse mixes of competencies resist a clear ordering on the continuum from "relapsed" to "permanently literate".

Good news from Nepal

Second, the effects of literacy training radiate into social groups around the learner and into institutional areas beyond education. Individual learning is supposed to benefit other members of the household, the institutions in which the learner participates, and through these the local community and eventually the wider society. Such effects can be observed, but they are difficult to attribute to the literacy training alone. They need time to mature (Stromquist 2006); and these maturation periods may exceed the time that academic studies can devote to observing outcomes and impacts. Longitudinal studies are rare; at
most they cover a few years. One of the most detailed and careful observed the effects on women learners in Nepal (Burchfield, Hua et al. 2002); it too was limited to two years after the training.

The Nepal study, now ten years' old, is worth recalling for some of its key insights, both into the actual effects of literacy training and into the kinds of challenges that such studies face in general. The study compared experimental groups of different program participation levels and controls - women who had not been involved in these particular trainings - on a wide range of indicators. It found consistent gains in literacy skills, health knowledge and practices, children's education, uptake of income-earning activities, community participation, as well as political awareness and participation.

From several of those indicators, the authors formed an index of participation in social and economic development. This allowed them to compare the overall effect of program participation to that of control variables, such as the general development in the country during the three-year period (which includes the training year) and the socio-economic status of the women's households.

An outstanding result

The key findings are: the program effect was about two-thirds of a poor woman's baseline index value. It was the same size as the high-status household effect, and was two times the period effect. This is an outstanding result, considering the difficulties for the poor to make significant headway in any area vis-à-vis higher-status fellow villagers.

This model is simple and largely convincing. It also illustrates some of the problems that beset the evaluation of literacy program effects. As the authors point out, both neoliterates and non-participants were exposed to a number of concurrent development programs that offered them new opportunities, some of which the index captured. In other words, literacy programs flow in a riverbed that they share with multiple cultural, social and economic developments.

Mixed with other developments

Some of these concern literacy itself, such as when children and younger siblings of the learners enroll in expanding school programs. Most will not directly offer literacy inputs, but rather opportunities to apply the new skills, social capital and self-confidence. In the Nepal study, these showed up as the "unknown factors" that improved the measured indicators by about half of the program effect (in fact, this is the period effect for year 2 and 3). However, such comparisons ("half of") need to be taken with caution; pending more specific tests, we cannot exclude that the period effect was as strong as, or even stronger than, the program effect.

Do the extremely poor participate? In the Nepal sample, the participants scored about 20 percent higher on the socio-economic status index than the non-participants did. The study controlled for this selection effect in questionable ways. The index conflates the economic position with the literacy baseline, instead of keeping them separate.
Estimating their relative influence on the selection of learners and on the socio-economic outcomes would have given additional insight.

But those are petty objections that do not take from the importance that the main findings in Nepal have for adult literacy policy. On many of the indicators, the gains continued from year 2 to year 3, for the participants as well as the non-participants. This suggests similar period effects for both groups - what some call "a tide that lifts all boats" - , but it does not contradict the "maturation thesis" either - the fact that the effects of the literacy training take time to fully materialize.

Unfortunately, this study did not observe outcomes for more than two years after the training year. There appear to be very few studies with longer observation periods. Esther Prins (2010) spoke with twelve adults in rural El Salvador six years after they had attended literacy classes. These learners identified as training benefits mainly the interpersonal relations that they had formed during the training.

By contrast, Blunch and Pörtner (2011) worked with a large sample of former participants and non-participants in Ghana, but had no data on how far back the trainings had taken place. They were interested exclusively in the consumption effect on the participant households. They found a significant effect in households where no adults had completed any formal education. Households that had some already educated members scarcely benefitted. In the no-prior-education households, the literacy training caused consumption to increase by 10 percent per adult. A cost-benefit analysis rated the social return as "very respectable" (page 60). These results suggest that adult literacy providers might want to recruit with preference from totally illiterate households.

**Effects beyond the individual learners**

What we learn from this short walk into the effectiveness literature is that program effects can be measured in very diverse ways. The diversity encompasses literacy competencies and their situated uses, non-literacy activities and outcomes among learners and others, interactions with ambient developments, and shorter and longer time spans in which competencies grow or decay.

Therefore, simple cross-sectional surveys of learners from the same program year may not be very productive; it may be helpful to work with ancient as well as recent learners, despite the dangers and limitations of retrospective data collection. Indirect effects of literacy training should not be overlooked if they can be credibly identified. Literacy campaigns in poor communities may have mobilizing effects that pull learners and others along together; as a result, indicators of empowerment such as greater representation of the poor in elected bodies may not reflect the influence of the literacy program in an immediate one-on-one correspondence. Although it is individuals who learn to read, write and calculate, ultimately program history and comparisons at the community level may reveal the broader dynamics.
[Sidebar:] What is success in adult literacy?

In 1979, Alan Charnley and Henry Arthur Jones (1979) wrote a small book with the title "The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy". It is a study of how adults in Great Britain, earlier in life described as illiterate, changed as a result of participating in tutored literacy classes. The findings emerged from extensive qualitative interviews with students, tutors and organizers.

The major finding was that the acquisition of reading and writing skills was only a small part of the achievements that the neo-literates self-reported, respectively that were observed by tutors and organizers. Sorting through vast piles of notes on different types of effects, Charnley and Jones ordered them into five categories. These are best explained by copying the whole list of behavior changes that the authors established, some of which hold an interest for this study as well:

1. **Affective personal achievements**
   (a) a feeling of ease within oneself
   (b) an improvement in self-reliance
   (c) an improvement in assurance
   (d) a diminution of anxiety
   (e) a willingness to reconsider personal attitudes
   (f) an ability to assess evidence
   (g) an improvement in physical bearing
   (h) a willingness to evangelize
   (i) an increase in confidence associated with literacy skills:
      (i) a diminution of anxiety with regard to literacy;
      (ii) an increase in concentration during tuition;
      (iii) an expression of an expectation to succeed in the literacy skills;
      (iv) an expression of enjoyment in reading and writing.

2. **Affective social achievements**
   (a) better relationships through being willing to put forward one’s point of view
   (b) better relationships within tuition groups
   (c) better relationships through sharing ideas about literacy
   (d) better relationships with all members of the family
   (e) better relationships through reading to children.

3. **Socio-economic achievements**
   (a) developing better relationships at the place of work
   (b) participation in civic duties such as:
      (i) participating in voluntary services
      (ii) accepting youth club leadership
      (iii) accepting committee membership duties
      (iv) improving parent-teacher liaison at children’s school
      (v) accepting jury service
   (c) the assumption of greater responsibility at work
   (d) getting a better job in terms of personal satisfaction and interest
   (e) increasing the capability of re-entering the employment market
   (f) getting a job in terms of more pay.

4. **Cognitive achievements**
   (a) Reading achievements displaying an increase in:
      (i) word recognition skills
      (ii) sentence recognition skills
      (iii) comprehension skills
(iv) the ability to read informational texts
(v) the ability to read texts beyond the purely informational levels
(vi) the ability to read newspapers.

(b) Writing achievements showing an improvement in:
   (i) the motor skill of writing
   (ii) spelling
   (iii) the ability to check spelling
   (iv) the ability to take dictation
   (v) the ability to complete commonly-used forms or questionnaires
   (vi) the ability to write letters
   (vii) the ability to write extended prose texts

5. Enactive achievements
   (a) regular attendance for tuition [i.e., in the literacy class, AB]
   (b) a movement from paired tuition at home to some form of group tuition
   (c) use of reading skills, as shown by:
      (i) reading to any number of the family
      (ii) reading instructions at work
      (iii) reading newspapers
      (iv) reading books
      (v) using the library service
      (vi) finding directions from street signs or maps
      (vii) using reading to exercise consumer choice
   (d) use of writing skills, as exemplified by:
      (i) completing forms, including cheques or payment slips
      (ii) signing Christmas cards and addressing envelopes
      (iii) writing free composition notes
      (iv) using writing skills at work
      (v) writing letters
   (e) the public display of literacy 'tools': pens, pencils, etc.
   (f) action to ameliorate physical deficiencies, such as acquiring spectacles
   (g) general use of literacy skills in locating places from street signs or maps
   (h) the use of communications relevant to consumer choice and payment systems
   (i) an ability to evaluate the reliability of various communications media
   (j) completion of homework assignments.

(pages 176-177).

It has to be kept in mind that these changes were reported in and by British students, but a fair portion will be relevant, with minor adaptations, also in other contexts including FIVDB’s working area. For example, 3. (b.) (iii) accepting committee membership duties has a parallel in FIVDB learners subsequently being elected to Community Learning Center executive committees. The book is over thirty years’ old; it does not address more recent opportunities and challenges such as those posed by computers and the new media.

While the list of changes is lengthy, at the end it prompted the authors to make this summary evaluation:

“Adult education is a healing process, but it cannot promise cures. If this proposition is acceptable, then it is understandable that the students in our sample and, over time, most of the tutors came to see that the literacy campaign was not a matter of skill-training but of adult education with special reference to literacy” (ibid.: 178).
**Adult literacy in Bangladesh**

With a background perspective outlined on literacy's relationship with human development and on identifying the effects of adult literacy training, we are now ready to sift through information that relates to the situation in Bangladesh. The latest official view, as publicized in the "Report on the Bangladesh Literacy Survey, 2010" (BBS 2011), is that 60 percent of the population aged 15 year and above are literate, and the remaining 40 percent illiterate. This strictly dichotomous measure - either literate or illiterate - is based on a single ability, that is, to "write a letter for communication" or not. The report does not suggest that a writing test was administered; thus we need to assume that literacy was self-reported. This causes upward bias because interviewees tend to overrate their literacy (Nath 2005).

This strict "either-or" definition goes against the grain of the dominant philosophy, which considers literacy abilities to fill a smooth continuum. This view is held also by some Bangladeshi researchers (e.g., Ahmed 2011), who obviously have not prevailed on the designers of the 2010 Literacy Survey. We will therefore make limited use of these statistics and return to this document later only for the estimates that it offers of the prevalence of certain uses of reading and writing.

**Progress**

Historically, adult literacy progressed from 29 percent in 1981, to 42 percent in 1994, and to 56 percent in 2000 (calculated from Sen and Ali 2005: 13), and then to 60 percent by 2010 (this BBS estimate). If the advance in this latest decade appears very modest, this is likely due to changing definitions.

Three years earlier, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics had conducted a more detailed literacy study that used a graded literacy concept and relied on testing and scoring sample members (BBS and UNESCO 2008). The design was inspired by international, government and civil society traditions of literacy assessment. On the part of Bangladeshi civil society, notably the education advocacy group CAMPE and the long-standing literacy training provider Dhaka Ahsania Mission provided input.

The report offers a wealth of information relevant to adult literacy and literacy training. The study collected data on 12,096 respondents of age 11 years and above, who were administered a combined reading, writing, numeracy and general knowledge test. The score range [0, 100] was divided into four equal-length intervals, each defining a literacy level: Non-literate, semi-literate, literate at initial level, literate at advanced level. A small section is devoted to adult literacy; adults are defined by age 15 and above. The adult sample size is not reported.

**A more reliable picture**

Based on the test results, BBS computed an adult literacy rate of 48.8 percent. The rural/urban difference is substantial: the rate is 46.4 percent for the rural subsample, and 56.9 percent for urban areas. The report highlights the fact that the female rate (49.1 percent) was higher than the male rate (48.6) "for the first time in Bangladesh" (page 33), but this small difference may be due to the accident of sampling.
The age-wise breakdown of the literacy rate requires some explaining, which the report
does not provide. Surprisingly, the three age groups in the range 15 to 29 years all
finished lower than the older age groups in the range 30 to 49 years. This is counter-
intuitive\(^1\).

### Table 1: Literacy rate 2008, by age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11-14</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>58.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>51.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-69</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-74</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>40.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** BBS 2008:37, Table 4.1.

The rates reflect age factors (school careers in the young, relapse in some adults) as well
as cohort factors (expanding school enrollment in recent decades), and even unobserved
period factors (changing school quality over the years). These cannot be teased out from
the table. However, we can see that a significant drop-off happened only after age 54, and
even then it was relatively modest. This indicates that, within the existing pool of literate
persons, skills have to a considerable degree persisted through age. The older sample
members who were rated literate must have kept up enough literacy practice in order to
pass the test in 2008.

The distribution over skill levels is informative as well. For the adult sample, the extreme
values - non-literate and advanced-literate - dominate\(^2\).

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\(^1\) The test instrument may not be age-neutral. Younger examinees may feel intimidated when the test takes
place under the watchful eyes of older family members and neighbors. If this is so, it will send a warning
also to adult literacy trainers.

\(^2\) This is different from the performance of the 11 - 14 years' old. For these, a table grouped by test scores
(page 32) gives a distribution with three peaks: for the score range 0-10 (which is part of "non-literate", for
61-70 (part of "literate at initial level", as well as for 91-100 (the highest segment for the advanced-literate).
The report does not include a similar table for the adult sample.
Table 2: Adult literacy rate, by skill level and gender (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy level</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-literate</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-literate</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate at initial level</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate at advanced level</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BBS 2008:34, Table 3.14.

Although our ultimate concern is with adults acquiring literacy outside formal schooling, the BBS study warrants a close look at statistics that report literacy rates as a function of years completed in formal schooling. This table conflates test result for adults with those of children 11-14 years' old, many of whom we assume were still enrolled in school at the time of interview. A breakdown by age would have allowed us to observe literacy retention with increasing biographic distance from formal education, but the report does not provide it. These figures, therefore, have to be interpreted with great caution.

Table 3: Literacy rate (percent), by completed school years, rural/urban, and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class completed</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>59.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>71.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>98.8</td>
<td>99.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11+</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BBS 2008: 41, Table 4.3.

We focus on the rural subsample. Attendance for one year of primary school typically does not confer literacy. Among sample members with three years of education completed, a third passed the test. Note the almost equal increases from three years to seven years completed. Sustainable literacy for virtually all in the rural areas was achieved after nine years of schooling. As a curious fact, note also that, for both urban and rural groups combined, girls reached sustainable literacy with a high probability after eight years of education; boys took a year longer.

The implication for adult literacy training is obvious although precise extrapolations must not be attempted. Even when we take into account that the BBS statistic conflates age
groups, the fact that among sample members with five years of education only half passed the test is alarming. Thus, even under liberal assumptions that student commitment and instructor quality in adult literacy courses are higher than in children's primary education, one will expect significant relapse into illiteracy.

**Uses of reading and writing**

We return briefly to the Bangladesh Literacy Survey 2010 (BBS 2011: op.cit.) to report some illustrative figures on the uses reading and writing. These come as percentages denominated to the entire sample of respondents five years or older. They thus underestimate the proportion of practicing adults. We combine figures for different retrospective periods in approximate percentages of respondents who ever read, respectively wrote particular types of documents in the last three months.

**Table 4: Uses of reading and writing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVER READ</th>
<th>EVER WROTE, FILLED, PREPARED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road signs, shop names</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters, pamphlets</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers, magazines</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories, novels</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuals, reference books</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills and invoices</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charts, maps</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Figures are percentages of all sample members (i.e., 5 years and older) who reported certain practices in the last three months prior to the interview.*

The relative frequencies of these literate operations suggest a three-tier distribution of reading competencies and a simpler, two-tier distribution in writing. One is tempted to consider the - at least sporadic - reading of newspapers and magazines as the mark of sustained literacy. If that is reasonable, one can estimate that, among the firmly literate population, about a fifth have business documents addressed to them (the bills and invoices they read), and a tenth create such documents (bills and invoices that they prepared). About half of the firmly literate write personal letters. Written communications with officialdom take place more through standardized forms than through official letters. The assumption that about a third of the firmly literate filled some forms during the past three months hints at the importance of literacy mediation; the majority of people, when faced with the need to handle official forms, may have to turn to others for help.

In sum, the rate of adult literacy has substantially grown over the past decades. All the same, Bangladesh remains a society with heavy inequality also in basic education. It must not surprise us that the large gaps provoked movements to accelerate literacy, both from society and government.
Societal response
Tanvir (2009) has written a historical retrospective on literacy and education in Bangladesh. He retraces the policy response to widespread adult illiteracy primarily in terms of UNESCO's international agenda setting since the 1950 and the Education for All impulse that the World Conference on Education at Jomtien in 1990 gave. This is correct to the point that Bangladesh, an aid-dependent country, opens its national agenda to international policy currents.

But Tanvir neglects to mention that adult literacy was an indigenous concern early on, starting with the freedom fighters, and after independence, adopted and scaled up by NGOs, both national and international ones, as well as the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development in Comilla (the Academy had been active in the literacy movement since 1963) (Rahman, Yasmin et al. 2010: 571).

Ups and downs in government support
It is not clear what demonstration value these programs had for the Mass Education Program that the government pursued between 1980 and 1985. Whatever the program's disappointing results, the first large-scale response was attempted well before the Jomtien conference on "Education for All" in 1990 (Wikipedia 2012a). Tanvir goes on to lay out the convoluted history of the literacy programs that the government resumed in the 1990, with considerable administrative reorganization and with a succession of objectives and target groups. The magnitudes of government and NGO efforts are difficult to compare because NGOs were often subcontracted for literacy work. The non-formal education program known as Post-Literacy and Continuing Education (PLCEHD-2), largely funded by the Asian Development Bank between 2002 and 2011, was to create 85,000 "continuing education centers" across the country (Rahman et al., op.cit., 577). This is a planning figure; we do not know actual output. By contrast, the government collected information on 1,048 NGOs active in the education sector in 2008; they were then operating 6,574 adult learning centers (reported by Tanvir, op.cit., 12).

Tanvir concludes his historical analysis by repeating observations that an Asia Pacific civil society assessment of adult education had made in 2003, and which still apply to the sector in Bangladesh: Adult education has a low status, is poorly funded, is of poor quality, and suffers from a dearth of information and analysis. Budgetary shares are telling: literacy and non-formal education claim about 3.7 percent of total education expenditure (op.cit.: 8 and 13).

Literacy theory to study FIVDB's experience
FIVDB has been conducting its adult literacy program for more than thirty years. Its history is the subject of a separate chapter. Numerous villages in FIVDB's working area host both ancient and recent learners, as well as participants in other programs. Many have formed Community Learning Centers (CLSs); these are important avenues to public roles for learners, for post-literacy support, and for the practical application of the acquired skills in transactions that the Centers undertake for local development projects.
These villages offer rich opportunities to study the effects of adult literacy programs. However, because several institutional levels and time periods are involved, unraveling causal factors is difficult. Anecdotic observations confirm the paradox earlier mentioned: individual learners may relapse into illiteracy; nevertheless in autobiographic statements they consider the training beneficial.

One literacy or many literacies?
This creates a dilemma for FIVDB's self-assessment: on one side, there is a legitimate interest to know a meaningful literacy rate in the working area population, and to know the contribution that the adult literacy program has made to lifting it over time. On the other hand, as the New Literacies school has demonstrated, learners practice their skills in very diverse combinations. They solve tasks that require reading, writing and arithmetic using their own skills as well as those of others that they recruit for the purposes at hand. Many learners, also those who manage such tasks effectively, would not pass standardized post-literacy tests, years after class.

From Amartya Sen to measurement
There are different ways to tackle this paradox. We particularly mention the work of Maddox and Esposito (2011) because Maddox knows the literacy situation in Bangladesh well, and their proposed methodology appeared in the prominent journal "World Development". These authors acknowledge both the need to quantitatively measure literacy and to respect the diversity of individual practices. They propose a measure in which the individual learner attaches values to certain tasks (the authors call them "functionings", in Sen's spirit). For example, person A might attach a value of 4 to his skill of reading business letters, but only 2 to his ability to supervise the children's homework. For person B, these values may be 0 and 5, respectively.

The measure for an individual's literacy then is calculated as an index: at first, the indicators of the skills that he demonstrates for each functioning ("the achievements") are multiplied with their individual values. Then the index value is taken as the mean of these products. Individuals' literacy thus can be compared on a quantitative measure - one that acknowledges their personal values.

Although new and original, this proposal is unsatisfactory in our eyes. Plausibly, learners value their achieved "functionings" more highly than other literacy tasks for which they lack the needed skills. The pride widely reported for being able to sign, rather than thumb-print, documents, combined with relative indifference to the decay of reading and writing skills, speaks for this assumption. Thus valuations and actual abilities are correlated, an undesirable property for this index.

Social groups collaborating in literacy
Second, the Maddox-Esposito proposal takes no account of literacy as a group-based skill. This, however, is the main direction in which we wish to explore FIVDB's experience. We believe that by extending the concept of "functionings" from the individual learner to the social groups of which she is a member, we can mitigate the paradox of ineffective individual learning (relapse into illiteracy) side by side with a high appreciation that literacy training seem to enjoy in the communities.
Our basic assumption is that in the majority of the adult literacy learners their technical skills at first increase, and then slowly *decrease* over the course of their lifetimes. At the same time, the combined skills of household members, of neighborhoods and of village communities *increase*.

The mechanism works via expanded school education as well as via greater opportunities to apply (and thus refresh and sharpen) literacy in livelihoods and in civil society organizations. Learners who are or become parents attach greater value to their children's education and take advantage of the expanding school supply. The newly educated children help their less literate family members and neighbors deal with literacy tasks. In parallel, adult learners, their school-educated family members and other extant literate community members enlarge the capacity pool of local civil society organizations. In fact, they expand the capacity of their communities to found and sustain such organizations\(^3\).

The cause-effect links from adult literacy training to the functioning of local organization are not open to direct observation. This is true also of the connection between FIVDB's program and the Community Learning Centers. We can, theoretically, compare civil society outcomes across villages with higher or lower training intensity. But on both sides of the equation - literacy training and local organizations - there are too many variables to be considered for any conclusive comparisons.

### Routinization

At several junctures, we interpret features and developments of the program in terms of a concept known as "routinization". This needs minimal explanation. "Routines" are patterns of behaviors that are repeated, largely standardized, predictable and, in most cases, no longer needing explanation (except when they patently fail to work or when new members have to be trained). Routinization is the process of creating routines and ensuring that the concerned actors follow them. A simple example is medication for AIDS sufferers and the efforts it takes to have them "routinely" follow the full regime, also when the symptoms are not manifest.

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\(^3\) This has not always been the research consensus. In their classic study of local organizations in development, Esman and Uphoff (1984: 227) concluded that "illiteracy on the part of leaders is not necessarily a barrier to effectiveness. . . If the leaders have the personality, motivation, and confidence in themselves and of the members) to be effective, ways can be found to compensate for limitations like illiteracy. For dealing with the 'outside' world, literacy is usually important, if only because of the status associated with it or the stigma attached by the educated to illiteracy. Internal coherence and strength, however, are usually more critical for an [local organization's] effectiveness than are its external linkages. External effectiveness cannot substitute for internal strength."

Yet some twenty years later, Uphoff emphasized that "due to a large increase in educational opportunity and in the acquisition of literacy and at least basic education the populations from which the membership and constituents of RLIs are drawn have ever more access to knowledge about the world around them. This also means that the skills and capacities of persons in and around RLIs [Rural Local Institutions] are becoming greater" (Uphoff and Buck 2006: 16).
Closer to adult literacy, language grammar consists of routines. The child unconsciously learns them as he grows up surrounded by competent speakers. The routines of reading and writing letters, words, phrases, and entire documents by contrast, are the result of much conscious effort. As the relapse into illiteracy and the need for post-literacy support prove, they are far less permanent than the competency to produce meaningful spoken utterances.

Routinization, for some, has a bad taste, implying mindless bureaucratic adherence to practices that do not work for the higher goals. If so, criticism and resistance are justified. However, routinization is also a source of efficiency; efficient organizations may find it easier to innovate on a higher plane and hence to transform their practices, or their entire industries, into a new generation of routines - i.e. superior routines. Thus, routines are a double-edged sword.

In the adult literacy field in Bangladesh, the major thrust of routinization came early, with the establishment of primer-driven training courses in the seventies and eighties. FIVDB was one of the most active participants in this. We will touch upon the costs and benefits of routinization at various points.

**Ancient learners, recent learners, civil society**

In our empirical work, we have pieced together evidence of literacy impact from various groups and by different methods. We spoke with ancient learners and facilitators - persons who participated in an FIVDB literacy class more than five years back -, asking about motivations at the time, subsequent uses of their skills, the current education levels of family members, and membership in the local CLCs. The perspective is biographic, with an eye on how educational and participation aspirations are fulfilled in the interviewees themselves, or are transferred to the children or to social groups outside the family.

Second, among recent learners - those who took the class two, but no more than four years ago - types of literacy operations (e.g., reading an address, multiplying two numbers) and the catalogue of social awareness themes to which the training exposed them may still be remembered fairly well. In leaning on Maddox and Esposito, we elicited the relative importance that a sample of recent learners attached to each among a small number (five) of typified literacy uses (e.g., helping the children with school homework, using mobile phones). The same learners also rated their relative ability in the same set of literacy uses. In addition, we analyze scores from tests administered to recent learners at the end of their eight-month course. While the importance and ability self-ratings open a window into the learners' own evaluations, the test scores measure performance against external expectations.

The third step took us to the CLCs themselves. Through a budgeting simulation, we elicited the relative importance that CLCs attach to adult literacy training as opposed to other types of projects for which they may seek outside financial and technical assistance.

The pieces of evidence are fragmentary. We have connected them through a process of interpretation between interviewers and the literacy and social organization staff in FIVDB. Our perspective is to look at adult literacy from outside the traditional education box: as a technology used in individual as well as group-based task solving, and as a mobilizing agent that moves poor people to work with programs and organizations that may empower them further.
Chapter summary
This chapter provides theoretical background on select aspects of adult literacy and literacy training. The starting point is the basic function of literacy to provide security for the individual who lives in a modern world dominated by literate people, signs and documents. Literacy is fundamental to human development; the adult literacy rate was one of the indicators incorporated in the initial formulation of the Human Development Index.

Basic distinctions
Theories of literacy struggle with the paradox that literacy skills are finely graded and diverse from person to person, but at all levels of society - face-to-face interaction, formal organizations, and nation states - binary classifications persist that pit "literate" against "illiterate", notably also in such constructs as the "adult literacy rate". A second important distinction is between the fully socialized adult - the target recipient of adult education, including literacy training - and the incompletely socialized child. Most literacy in modern society is acquired in schools, by children, who submit to teacher-led instruction on the orders of parents and school authorities. The modern education system has evolved around the child. Adult education, by contrast, must satisfy the motivations of voluntary participants, whose knowledge and life experience puts them on a similar footing with instructors and facilitators. Like the strict literate/illiterate distinction, the one between child and adult too is subverted by intermediate categories. These are the adolescents, to whom FIVDB has adapted its literacy training offers.

The autonomy of adult learners is circumscribed most drastically by their poverty. The adult literacy philosophy of Paulo Freire, which FIVDB has translated into its program from its inception, counters that with a liberation curriculum. Social awareness and collective action gains, therefore, are as important as the technical skills of manipulating symbols in reading, writing and calculation. This has consequences both for the well-being that literacy training enhances in poor participants and for evaluating the effectiveness of such programs. Participants report improvements in several areas of well-being beyond education.

These effects, however, are difficult to attribute clearly to the literacy training. We summarize in some detail an evaluation of a program in Nepal, which suggest that the benefits of literacy keep growing after the end of the training. Also, the supposedly widespread relapse into illiteracy is contested in empirical research. For the purposes of FIVDB's strategic thinking, training effects that radiate beyond the individual learner into households and communities are particularly noteworthy. Nevertheless, doubts about the effectiveness of adult literacy programs caused donors to largely exclude them from their funding priorities.

Cornerstone statistics on Bangladesh
The chapter then briefly leaves the realm of theory and program evaluation in order to report literacy estimates for Bangladesh. A test-based study, by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics / UNESCO, in 2008 estimated that 49 percent of the adults were literate. The same study concluded that among persons with completed primary schooling, but no further education, 59 percent could be considered literate (and thus 41 percent illiterate). This relapse statistic would be consonant with the expected high relapse in adult literacy learners, about whom, however, we do not have statistics for Bangladesh. Although governmental mass education
programs go back to at least 1980, and numerous NGOs have operated their own or subcontracted adult literacy programs, little is known about their longer-term effectiveness.

The chapter finishes with a preview of the various research pieces through which we accessed the FIVDB experience, in encounters with former participants and facilitators as well as with Community Learning Centers.
Chapter 3: The FIVDB adult literacy program over time

Long-term engagement
Among NGOs in Bangladesh with significant adult literacy programs, FIVDB was one of the pioneers. In contrast to other pioneers who have since left adult literacy behind, FIVDB has continued its as one of the mainstays of its multi-sectoral approach to rural poverty reduction. To this day, accounts of early literacy work occupy an important place in its corporate identity. Pride in the program's tenacity and in its multiple highlights is in part rooted in its countercyclical history, with a long expansion continued into the 1990s, a period when many international donors had lost faith in adult literacy training. FIVDB's persisted.

The history of this program confirms some of the institutional dynamics that Maddox (Undated: see previous chapter) observed about adult literacy programs in Bangladesh. In other respects, FIVDB went its own ways. The key innovations happened early, after a short phase of small-scale innovation. Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (2007 [1968]) provided a common intellectual focus although the ways of translating his precepts into teaching methodologies on the ground would soon diverge among practitioners in Bangladesh. Legitimacy for a new kind of social practice - adults, particularly women, meeting in informal classes in the village -, the textbook ("primer")-based instruction delivered by volunteers, and the mixture of technical literacy and numeracy training with social analysis became key achievements for the sector in the 1980s. This was followed by refining the existing approaches, by way of curricula revisions and outreach to urban poor and to remote districts. The FIVDB literacy staff deliberated also about special curricula for women and adolescents. Courses for the latter were started after 2008 only. Adult classes have been kept separate by gender, but contents have remained unified.

Adult literacy - a niche for smaller NGOs?
Major innovations after the 1990s are not apparent in the Bangladeshi adult literacy sector. But the stakeholders did rearrange themselves to a degree. After the fall of the Ershad regime in 1990, the government resumed a stronger interest in this work although it is difficult to know how much was done on the ground. Much of the effort was subcontracted to NGOs. Opinions on whether adult literacy was a big loser in donor policy changes starting in the late 1980s differ; for example, for Maddox (op.cit.: 5) "the 1990's saw consistently high rates of adult literacy provision" in Bangladesh; for Abadzi (2003), looking at the sectorwide World Bank activity, adult literacy almost disappeared in the 1980s, with some activity rekindled in the 1990s. It is safe to assume that the efforts of numerous NGOs to jump on the bandwagon of the microfinance revolution further deflected attention from adult literacy. So did the expansion of formal schooling, in the sense that children's education appeared more cost-effective and sustainable than adult literacy programs with their presumed high relapse rates. Notably, the large NGO BRAC transited from its early pioneer role in adult literacy to a massive primary education operation, thus leaving the former as a less contested niche for smaller NGOs.
**History in three phases**

That environment fashioned the evolution also of FIVDB's literacy program, but only up to a point. In the conservative culture of Sylhet, the institutionalization of literacy classes was by far not as straightforward as the national history may suggest. If one accepts sweeping headlines for periods of history, one may recognize in the FIVDB literacy program a succession of three phases. The creation of an organizational identity was the first. It was followed by a phase of expansion and public recognition. Contraction and reorientation define the third phase, with adult literacy finding a new home inside a social organization innovation, the village-based Community Learning Centers.

**Creation of its own identity**

FIVDB emerged from the Bangladesh program of the International Voluntary Service (IVS) in 1980. IVS Bangladesh had begun experimenting with adult literacy training in 1976, initially using a curriculum and materials developed by the NGO BRAC. Two years later, it tried out the curriculum that the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) had been promoting since the 1960s. It was supposedly more effective in imparting the technical skills of reading and writing whereas BRAC's was stronger at mobilization and social awareness. The IVS days gave a number of future FIVDB senior staff the freedom to intensely debate the ideas of Paulo Freire while operations were running on a small scale. Freire's radical liberation pedagogy - recognizing for the learners "a much greater right than that of being literate ... the right to have a voice" - would provide the intellectual underpinnings for the nascent program.

**A strategic decision**

FIVDB saw the need to meld the BRAC and BARD approaches, and in 1980 started to develop its own curriculum and materials. This was a strategic decision, and a courageous one at that. The risk of failure was substantial, given FIVDB's modest stature, the presence of competing models in the national arena, and the internal strains on key personnel to either work on literacy development or in field assignments. Yet this decision was liberating; it allowed enthusiastic young workers to take full ownership of a program which they were building from their own hearts and minds and, just as importantly, to build it in ways adapted to local conditions.

For example, in the diglossic Bangla language environment, with a Sanskritized high level used in formal writing (sadhu bhasha) and a colloquial low level in informal settings (cholit bhasha), conscientization-minded literacy programs with a national scope like BRAC's naturally opted for cholit, the everyday language spoken by the poor. However, FIVDB determined that the verb forms used in the Sylhet region were closer to sadhu, and thus initially adopted this version for its literacy materials.

In substantive terms, the program challenged the learners primarily in five issue areas - health, nutrition, agriculture (which included livestock), education and co-operative society management. As a cross-cutting concern, the curriculum raised gender issues as well, not without danger. A program facility in a village cluster was burned down by men...
opposing the meetings of village women with outsiders; and in other villages too staff
and facilitators had to tread carefully. Twice, in consultation with religious leaders, terms
used in the lessons were replaced to accommodate their objections.

**Part of the NGO’s foundation narrative**
The lessons of the emerging curriculum were scripted in close feedback with the
experimental teaching activity, with core team instructors returning to the office after
night classes to review the fresh experience, write the material for the next day's lesson
and churn out copies on a tabletop printer in the morning. Those hectic days are
remembered with great emotional intensity, as part of FIVDB’s foundation narrative. That
they were later claimed as "action research", while factually correct, is almost trivializing
- 29,000 Google search hits for "adult literacy", "curriculum development" and "action
research" jointly reveal this as a common practice. What matters more is that the
feedback loops at the time were short, and both symbol and issue comprehension was
evaluated continuously and jointly.

This early phase of program development benefitted from the leadership of an IVS
volunteer, James Jennings, a US-trained educationalist fluent in spoken and written
Bangla. FIVDB was fortunate also in recruiting, from among the small set of persons
experienced in adult literacy, Habibur Rahman and Dipti Rozario, providing together
with Jennings the critical mass needed to conduct meaningful linguistic and didactic
research in the program villages. Jennings would later analyze this experience in a
doctoral thesis (Jennings 1990), to date the only book-length scholarly account of the
program.

**Social consciousness and individual sufficiency**
This curriculum was inaugurated in the field in 1981, in the form of two primers. A third
was added in the next year. Its hallmarks were the controlled vocabulary and a mode of
instruction that struck an eclectic balance in alphabet, whole-word and sentence learning.
Other elements of the approach - the dual objective of raising social consciousness and of
self-sufficiency in the day-to-day literacy challenges facing the poor; teaching learners in
gender-specific groups; using volunteer teachers trained in short courses; provisions for
record keeping and course evaluation - were common with those of other providers.

**Early post-literacy beginnings**
Early on, FIVDB recognized the need to stabilize the skills and practices of the newly
literate, through what are now commonly referred to as "post-literacy" programs. Some
of the seminal choices in this area - box libraries and the additional reading material
known as "Amader kotha" ("Our word") come to mind - proved strategically fortuitous
and have guided the program to this day. As an indicator of continuity, "Gram Bandhab"
("The Village Friend"), a quarterly newsletter with contributions by and for neo-literates,
has been running continuously since 1979 (a bi-monthly magazine, "Bikash" ("blooming",
"growth") was added in 1991; it has since appeared regularly).

Post-literacy began with informal experiments around 1984, and in a more formalized
approach in 1989. The provision of practice opportunities in the village environments of
the new learners is a recurring endeavor to this day. FIVDB has pursued it through the so-called Community Learning Centers (CLCs), on which some more further below.

**Recognition and expansion**

The literacy experiments did not stay hidden for long. In 1982, FIVDB presented curriculum and materials at a seminar organized by the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB). The following year, a donor agency requested an evaluation, for which Father R.W. Timm, a key figure of the NGO learning community, was engaged. He commended the approach for the potential that it held for other providers:

> “The three literacy books and the teachers’ guide, developed by FIVDB for its literacy programme, are an outstanding accomplishment of innovative teaching of illiterates. A thoroughly researched procedure has been followed in the production of these materials. They should be useful for dozens of other agencies throughout the country.”

These endorsements were instrumental to other agencies adopting FIVDB literacy materials. By 1985 some forty NGOs had become regular users, making FIVDB a leading player in the field of adult education in Bangladesh. The circle of customers kept growing in the late 1980s, to include international NGOs such as World Vision and the Mennonite Central Committee as well as some of the larger national NGOs such as Proshika and Caritas. Over time, the list of organizations in Bangladesh using FIVDB's materials grew to the neighborhood of three hundred; one estimate placed the cumulative number of learners reached through them at 26.5 million. Twice, the materials were adapted for foreign cultural and language environments: in 1991, OXFAM India created a Hindi version for use in Bihar and Orissa, and in 1996 the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) adapted the materials in Arabic for use in Yemen.

**National outreach**

The successful diffusion of the approach and of its supporting printed materials demanded adjustments. These were of organizational as well as substantive order. The demand for training of trainers soared, and so did the burden of running a supply line from commercial printing to warehousing and shipping. The logistics were moved from the Sylhet-based head office to the Dhaka liaison office, which in later years would host also the materials development team.

With NGOs applying FIVDB's training materials in all corners of the country, the original ties to the rural culture of Sylhet became a hindrance. Already in 1985, a national workshop brought together a number of users for the revision of the teacher's guide. This was not enough; their needs prompted FIVDB to undertake a review of the syllabus and to develop a new set of materials by 1990. In the process, the *sadhu* style was replaced by the more widely understood *cholti*. The primer-based delivery, with controlled vocabulary and each key word repeated multiple times during the length of the course, remained.
Working with new groups

Meanwhile, FIVDB's own operational involvement in adult literacy kept growing. The numbers of learners completing the course accelerated from 1989 to 1991 and, after a temporary drop, again until 1996. In that year, just under 3,500 learners completed the course, a number not attained again until the much larger program "Jonoshilon" kindled a dramatic new flourish in 2009.

In short succession, FIVDB met new kinds of learners, each making its own demands and offering novel experience. Thus, between 1991 and 1995, FIVDB expanded the literacy program in Sunamganj, a particularly poor district to the west of Sylhet. It found ways to involve the local communities in organizing classes, with less dependency on staff than previously. These adult learners proved to be more attracted to traditional, school-like, literacy training, and less so to social awareness sessions. They wanted to learn to read and write in ways that helped them to supervise the homework of their school-going children. This caused the FIVDB courses to give greater emphasis to alphabet-based teaching, a concession to school didactics. Earlier, alphabet charts had been deliberately kept out of the class venues.

Figure 2: Learners completing basic literacy courses, 1981 - 2012

In 1997, FIVDB began responding to the literacy training needs of Manipuri and Patro tribal groups in Sylhet. Syllabi in these languages were not developed as these learners clearly expressed their need to improve their Bangla competency. Rather FIVDB over the years worked as a patron to the cultural heritage, with periodic public events, regular
publication of a magazine ("Manush", meaning "human being") and networking between villages and educated members in the city.

A minor urban inroad
Between 1996 and 2001, FIVDB developed materials for, and conducted a small training program with, slum dwellers in Dhaka. Its teachers had to fend with the distractions that the urban survival struggle caused, with high drop-out and with expectations to offer classes in a traditional school format. At the same time, the urban environment offered the use of up-to-date real-world printed material for improvised and interactive teaching. Urban literacy work using FIVDB materials subsequently was continued by other NGOs.

Official recognition
Between 1998 and 2001, under contract with the government, FIVDB revised the curriculum and materials earlier developed by the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE). There is no evidence that the Bureau, or other government agencies, used these resources to any significant extent before 2011 (BNFE 2011).


Contraction and reorientation
After 1996, FIVDB's own literacy training output, measured in completed learners, fluctuated from year to year. After 2001 it declined steeply, with no classes conducted in 2003 and 2004. The contraction was caused by changes in the donor portfolio and by an extended review and experimentation phase that the sobering results of tests administered in 2001 and 2002 necessitated. These had revealed that only five percent of the learners achieved minimal writing competency - writing a short letter -, and that women lagged behind men in numeracy skills.

Integrating post-literacy work
Consequently, the revision of curriculum and syllabus focused on technical competencies. Also it reinforced post-literacy investments, in the form of longer courses, village libraries and wall magazines as the most popular learner-generated material. The internal review went hand in hand with consultations with user organizations and with a field survey in three regions of the country. FIVDB in Sylhet Division, World Vision in Chittagong and CDC in Kushtia piloted the ensuing draft curriculum. This came to breathe more of the spirit of rights-based approaches to development, with additional sessions devoted to women's and civic rights, advocacy and entitlements, local government and participatory planning, HIV-AIDS and the environment. The testing and feedback cycles informed a new set of materials ready by mid-2004.

In the perspective of "lifelong learning"
FIVDB credited the thrust of the reform to the "whole language" approach (Wikipedia 2012d). Whether this was basically intended in opposition to phonetics-based teaching or
for the stronger emphasis of conceptual enrichment in unschooled learners is not quite clear in retrospect. Practically, it came down to an eight-month literacy and numeracy course, including a post-literacy component. Combined with the village libraries, the post-literacy efforts aimed to wean learners from continued dependency on facilitators and to launch them on a course of lifelong learning.

Integration with other programs ..

The reorientation entailed organizational changes as well. In part, these were a response to pendulum swings that FIVDB, like other multi-sectoral NGOs in Bangladesh, had undergone between periods of higher program integration and others of more pronounced sectoral autonomy. Initially, the literacy program was an intake agent for the integrated rural development program, meaning that during the early part of the course the learners were encouraged to form savings groups and were linked up with other program components, notably health and livelihood skills, but also sanitation and nutrition. In fact, FIVDB had from the beginning understood literacy training as enabling landless and poor households to competently participate in those program options.

This worked both ways. Among the early learners, about half made its first contact with FIVDB through the savings and credit program while one in three was directly recruited, the remainder joining via the health and various training programs. In retrospect, it is clear that admission policies were pragmatic. The divergent growth of sectoral programs within FIVDB dictated at which point of their participant careers the learners would be inducted to the literacy program. In Sunamganj District and in Zakiganj Upazila⁴, Sylhet, for example, a year's worth of savings, literacy training and membership in a village organization was the prerequisite for loans. By contrast, in Maulvibazar, it was the microfinance program that arrived first, with some of its customers joining literacy classes later.

Organizational experiments

Starting in 1988, FIVDB moved to building people's organizations at the village level. Fieldworkers who had been specialists in group formation, literacy work or microfinance received a new multipurpose role that made each of them responsible for all the work with the assigned organizations. An external evaluation in 1995 determined that the approach overstretched feasible program integration. Overburdened workers attended to microfinance activities at the expense of other program components. Literacy work was neglected. As a result, FIVDB converted to specialized departments. Four such were created in 1997: functional literacy and lifelong learning, livelihood enhancement, financial services and primary education.

.. and finally with the grassroots

In 2000, FIVDB began experimenting with a new form of grassroots organization, the Community Learning Center (CLC). The CLCs were formed around an existing post-literacy device, the small libraries that FIVDB had been equipping in villages with

⁴ Upazila = subdistrict. The administrative-territorial tiers rise, approximatively, from village to Union (commune) to Upazila to District to Division to the central government, not considering urban entities.
literacy classes. They were conceived of as a platform to support life-long learning activities, common-interest village improvements, democratic debate and planning as well as better household livelihoods. The initial trial-and-error phase spanned the years when FIVDB's literacy training precipitously contracted, was zero for two years and then slowly re-emerged. By late 2008, there were 69 CLCs operating.

A large new popular education program, Jonoshilon, has since stimulated the founding of more CLCs, with their total number running 691 in 2012. The CLCs are membership organizations; they attract the poor because they function as the intake agents for FIVDB's livelihood enhancement programs (although not for the microfinance or primary education programs).

As FIVDB's confidence in the CLCs' viability grew, and their expansion accelerated, the organization of literacy classes and of post-literacy events has been increasingly left to them. Under Jonoshilon, they became the exclusive mechanism for recruitment. The practical work, in manner typical of the NGO - community interface, is shared among local committees, facilitators drawing honoraria and FIVDB frontline workers. Distinctly from the earlier era, FIVDB need no longer negotiate literacy classes with village communities; it receives requests from local organizations. Yet, while the CLCs set up the classes, they have not yet been enabled to effectively monitor their progress; FIVDB's fieldworkers have remained heavily engaged in supervising ongoing classes.

**Relationships beyond literacy**

The CLCs, in diverse local combinations, meet other functions as well, including some for FIVDB. The connections between its members and FIVDB go beyond literacy; significant numbers of their siblings, children and neighbors attend FIVDB's primary schools. Similarly, in some areas this group overlaps, in unknown degree, with the clienteles of the microfinance program and of specific bilateral projects. The fabric of these relationships supplies the social awareness part of the literacy training with more actionable topics, heightened curiosity and diverse experience from learners and those close to them.

Moreover, CLC executive members are the target group for a variety of training courses. Some of these, while not aimed at the technical aspects of literacy, plausibly hone the skills of social analysis, planning and leadership. During the Jonoshilon years, the CLCs participated in various combinations of participatory rural appraisal-inspired exercises, popular theatre initiatives and community dialogues of various kinds. In a small number of cases, neighboring CLCs pledged to jointly manage small "Information Technology Centers"; more effectively, some CLCs acquired computers individually. The combined effect of these activities and investments is hard to measure; plausibly it accounts both for the dependable organization of literacy classes as well as for budding larger self-concepts with ambitions in village development and social assistance.

A critical question may be asked whether FIVDB had made intelligent use of the CLCs for its own conceptual growth. Individually, seniors engaged in adult literacy and community development overflow with anecdotes of what particular CLCs have done.
But FIVDB has not created systems to rely on the CLCs as listening posts into the world of the silent and marginalized. Everybody was busy with implementation issues in the fast expanding Jonoshilon project, with its quantitative targets and indicators. Staff turnover and the never-ending need to train novices were not conducive to deeper listening. Gentler arrangements to harness qualitative insights from the grassroots, such as via story-based monitoring or debriefing of CLC members in residential trainings, could not take shape in those conditions.

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**[Case study:] A productive life around literacy**

The story of Saletunesa Begum, a volunteer literacy trainer (shebika) with a twenty-year service record, can be told in many perspectives. In a tale of superlatives, she is a heroine, enrolling in literacy class together with her eldest daughter, graduating quickly to facilitating her own first class, eventually teaching forty-five classes in eight villages, and applying the social messages in her own life by marrying off her sons and daughters without taking or giving dowry, by standing up to dishonest shopkeepers and buyers of her manufactures, and keeping a reading culture alive in her home and in the local Community Learning Center. Saletunesa's high-spirited community service, while she was toiling as the principal breadwinner of an impoverished family, kindles feelings of respect and admiration.

A heroic life is noble, but it may also appear exceptional and unrepresentative of the lot of learners and teachers that have taken part in FIVDB's literacy program, each one with their own gifts and strengths. We will therefore focus on two alternative readings of her story that may be more instructive. First, Saletunesa's life as a de-facto household head - her husband was disabled - and as a shebika was deeply embedded in her local community. Second, working as a volunteer in adult literacy, and sometimes in other lines as well, helped stabilize her household economically, averting extreme poverty.

**The descent from a middle-class life**

Born into a respected, comfortable if not highly educated family - her father was an imam and land-owner; one of her eight siblings studied up to primary class 3 -, Saletunesa's early years did not presage a life in poverty. She received some Koranic education and, in the days of East Pakistan, learned an amount of Urdu and even of Nagri, the old Sylheti script. In 1964, at age 16, she was married to a man who worked as a porter on smuggling trails from India. She lived with him in an extended family that, similarly to hers, still owned some land.

Five years later, her husband became disabled, and Saletunesa began making bamboo and cane articles, which would be her earning mainstay in years to come. When her father-in-law died in 1974, the protections of an extended family life evaporated, and within two years, her husband's share in the family land was sold to pay for household and medical needs. Her first daughter was born in 1970. Six years later, when Saletunesa was pregnant with her first son, the family hit rock bottom, with Saletunesa working with bamboo, head-loading sand and threshing paddy to put food on the table. Her daughter, looking after the baby, missed school, and when, from age ten, she was able to assist in bamboo and cane work, Saletunesa felt the first sign of relief. She bore another daughter in 1979, and two more sons in 1982 and 1992. Her husband died in 1998.

**Beyond her village**

In 1986, FIVDB was organizing a literacy course in her village. When the shebika ran into trouble finding a locale for the class, Saletunesa was quick to offer what was left of her homestead as a meeting place. She, then 39 years' old, and her 16-year old daughter, both enrolled.
Already a year later, FIVDB trained Saletunesa to work as a literacy shebika, an activity she would continue for twenty years until her failing eyesight became forbidding. She would all in all conduct forty-five literacy classes in eight villages. During two seasons, in 1997 and 98, she doubled as an extended immunization volunteer, in a government program supported by FIVDB. At some point, she took an FIVDB tailoring training, a skill that she said she passed on to other poor women in the community.

**The educated younger generation**

Saletunesa dates the beginning of her economic recovery to the time when her first daughter added noticeably to her bamboo and cane production, around 1980. She let her first son complete primary school, then, when he was twelve, apprenticed him to a local painter, who taught him also the rudiments of land surveys. The third son started earning in a garage when he was eleven, in 2003. We know little about the middle son and the younger daughter, except that both of them completed primary school. In 2006, some time after their marriage, the household was divided, and Saletunesa has since stayed with her youngest son. In 2012, he married a girl who, Saletunesa emphasizes, with her secondary school certificate is now the best educated family member.

**Figure 3: Key events in Saletunesa's life**

The family are poor, but not extremely so. They have not been able to accumulate land, but neither did they lose their home. Saletunesa and her sons were exemplars of what some call occupational multiplicity - juggling several jobs, she in self-employed, daily-wage as well as NGO stipend work, her eldest son as a painter, mason and land surveyor. With the death of her husband, his medical bills ended. By the fact that Saletunesa hosted a literacy class in 1986 and all children save the eldest completed primary school, we take it that the family held their own, if precariously. None of her children went on to secondary school, an indication that her economic recovery has been modest.
**Individual, family, community**

Since she was married, Saletun has been living in Mollargaon, a 400-household village on the outskirts of Sylhet city, well connected by the Sunamganj-Sylhet tarmac road. At the time when she and her daughter attended literacy class, they reckoned that one in five adults in the village could sign their names. The beginnings of formal education in Mollargaon go back to a madrasa located some two kilometers outside; of its services up to secondary school equivalency many children have taken advantage over the past decades. Some instruction was available also at the local mosque. The first primary school in the village was founded in 1952 as a local initiative. It taken over by the government much later. Although the 1970s saw the first children from the village complete secondary school, enrollment in primary education did not grow dramatically until the 1990s. The assistant head teacher assured us that almost all the children of primary school age nowadays were enrolled. He added that absenteeism remained a problem among extremely poor children.

We thus find in Saletunesa's family history the same confluence of age and period effects that we underline elsewhere in this study. As she grew older, and her children completed primary school, married and eventually themselves had school-going children, younger members took over most of the reading and writing activities in the household. These generations benefitted from the vast expansion of formal education in the country, but also from the determination of Saletunesa and her literacy trainees to ensure that their children would go to school.

**Image 1: Saletunesa, long-time volunteer teacher**

After teaching adults to read and write for twenty years, Saletunesa is being read to by her granddaughter, who attends primary school, as almost all children her age in the village.
The family reads religious books, school textbooks, biographies as well as a daily newspaper.

**The community repays with respect and freedom**

When we look at Saletunesa through the double lens of life history and community development, we see a hard-working, perceptive, altruistic woman taking on numerous public service and leadership roles that the growth of government and NGO programs was offering in a relatively well-connected, economically advancing village. Saletunesa at one time was the leader of a Grameen Bank borrower group; FIVDB entrusted her with multiple functions; and for a while she was a member also of the primary school management committee and the vice-president of the local Community Learning Center. While some of these assignments changed, her status as a respected literacy volunteer kept rising, in the community as well as in FIVDB. Despite cultural restrictions on women's mobility, Saletunesa was welcomed in villages outside Mollargaon where she taught classes repeatedly. She relates with a sense of pride that several of her students have continued on their learning paths, some mastering types of documents that cause the poor and illiterate agony, such as land deeds. In 2003, FIVDB invited her to a national literacy festival in Dhaka, where she remembers meeting the speaker of the parliament. Her contribution to FIVDB's call for stories penned by neo-literates, "Anger is the cause of death", was printed in one of the story collections.

The warning against anger is as true as it is unexpected, but one may speculate that the secret of such a productive life has been that Saletunesa did not allow adversity to congeal in anger, but rather turned it outward, to shine a light for others.

*The case study is based on information that FIVDB workers collected during several visits to Saletunesa's home in May 2013.*

**Not the end of history**

The fusion of adult literacy training and grassroots organization in the CLCs is not the end of history. But the components and energies of the program have been re-arranged. The CLCs, with their committees, meeting places, action plans and libraries, provide FIVDB with a focal point for the selection and delivery of post-literacy work. Efforts to provide training that builds effective reading, writing and arithmetic skills and to adapt content and technique to wider social changes will continue.

In this spirit, another curriculum revision, giving greater emphasis to human rights, gender parity and empowerment, was drafted in 2012. An idea currently being debated is the replacement of the uniform eight-month course with a basic six-month course, followed, for the more interested learners and with locally determined time gaps, by an advanced course, also six months long. This essentially is an attempt to respond to a more diverse social environment with more diverse and flexible program offers.

Since 2009, interest in using FIVDB-produced materials has been rekindled among government and international agencies, helped by multiple visits to the FIVDB field and representation of FIVDB in literacy workshops. The Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE) initiated a review of materials that FIVDB had revised for them a decade ago. In 2011, it started using the second volume of "Amader Cetona" ["Our Awareness"] (BNFE 2011, op.cit.) in its own post-literacy work. The first volume is currently under review for
its likely use in a large UNICEF-sponsored program. Similarly, FIVDB was consulted on adapting those materials for use in tribal communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

In 2013, FIVDB found itself for the first time in the position of creating literacy training content for another entity outside its working area and traditional topics. It started creating a two-part financial literacy curriculum for the American agricultural development consultancy firm Winrock International. Winrock will implement the training directly for populations of the coastal belt; FIVDB retains the right to reuse the material. This it will likely do for an urban literacy project led by UNDP, for which it will add a livelihood literacy component. These partnerships have created an opportunity to branch out into content development less tightly knit to the northeastern field experience.

**Crossroads and continuities**

From the days when the IVS volunteer Zahin Ahmed, later to become FIVDB's executive director, was struggling to make sense of a book by never-before-heard-of Paulo Freire, to the point where most literacy classes are run by village-level organizations, more than a generation has gone by. The history that FIVDB made on the way is dotted with successes that surpassed expectations, dreams of the founders that the actual achievements disappointed as well as the innumerable unknowns of what might have happened had FIVDB or the adult literacy community taken the proverbial other road.

**Leadership in adult education**

Within fifteen years of laying down the philosophical underpinnings for its own operational program, FIVDB had grown to be a national leader in adult literacy, supplying the NGO community with a coherent system and the physical tools that would reach multiple times the number of learners that its own operations enrolled. Feedback from this larger community of practice in turn helped FIVDB to adapt the literacy program to social and philosophical changes.

Duly recognized by UNICEF and the government, the program nevertheless had its strongest friends among donors and NGOs. Although cited with awards and consulted many times, FIVDB made inroads into the government's adult literacy programs only after an unpredictably long gestation. It has experienced similar limitations, as concerns government response, with its primary school program meant to offer exemplars of effective education.

FIVDB's ability to steadily develop adult literacy training was enhanced by continuous funding from a European donor consortium that underwrote much of its multi-sectoral effort at poverty reduction for close to twenty years. Long-term program funding made investments in scaled-up operations and in outreach possible during an era when adult literacy training had fallen out of favor with the World Bank and its signal takers. The many small and mid-sized NGOs using FIVDB's literacy materials amplified its stature in the national and, to a degree, international community of practice. Perhaps it was an involuntary irony that BRAC, Bangladesh's largest NGO, should have moved away from
adult literacy, thereby allowing the much smaller FIVDB to get out of its shadow and closer to the policy table.

**Routine and change**

The philosophical impulse that the fledgling FIVDB received from Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is still active to this day. The literacy program helps some of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society to find their voice and then, within the limits that culture and power set, to be heard. But Freire is not a household word in the CLCs that run classes nor among the younger of the fieldworkers who support their efforts. His tenets have been routinized in materials and schedules that arrange for a series of social awareness-related activities during training as well as provide optional content during later post-literacy.

The dream that adult literacy would lend wings to social movements among the poor has not come true. Rather, routinization has enabled periodic revisions of syllabi, thus allowing literacy training to go with the flow of times, exposing learners of low literacy backgrounds to new topics, issues and intellectual operations to connect them with their daily lives. It has done so on domesticated, yet enlightened platforms, of which the CLCs themselves are the product of a long and careful trial and error process.

**Costs and benefits**

Well-oiled routines are the basis for bigger scale and greater efficiency, also in literacy training. Maddox highlighted the preference of Bangladeshi NGOs for a primer-based adult literacy approach. Primers are printed routines. And, in fact, in the nineties when ActionAid's REFLECT methodology (Archer and Goreth 2004), doing away with primers, enjoyed considerable donor support, FIVDB visited the program - and decided to stay with its primers, if only for their predictable effectiveness in teaching the technical skills of literacy. One could also argue that FIVDB's good routines produced good results, good results motivated continued funding, and solid funding allowed FIVDB to continue expanding its literacy routines into the mid-nineties, thereby delaying the need for more radical innovation. The program has barely begun to explore the implications of the new media. Routinization has obvious benefits as well as (largely hidden) costs.

**Dual purpose technology**

There is another way of looking at that dilemma. Throughout the history of this program, it has reminded FIVDB that adult literacy is a dual-purpose technology. On one hand, starting with the ugly fact that society treats some members as "illiterates", literacy training imparts individual skills, in basic reading, writing and numeracy, and hence the social status of literate persons. On the other, the training syllabi are made to stimulate deliberations about past conditions, current issues and better futures affecting entire social groups. Between its individual and collective functions, literacy advances in constant tension. At times, FIVDB was shaken by recognition (or reconfirmation) that the technical skills of the learners remained poor. The need for post-literacy support was in itself an admission that adult literacy, in its strictly individual function, was not sustainable - its detractors are right that many learners achieve so little that they are bound to relapse into illiteracy.
But the collective effects of the myriad trainings have worked their way through poor communities. Young adults flocked to learn basic literacy so as to help their children through school. CLCs, borrower groups, local government bodies created leadership positions to which learners, some of very humble background, have been elected. The capacity to deal with documents and planning processes has grown. And, eventually, the sum of all post-literacy efforts may indeed implant the concept of lifelong learning in the local culture.

The strategy made the difference
The cornerstone on which this thirty-five-year history rests is clearly marked. It is the strategic decision, taken in 1980, to create FIVDB's own adult literacy program, complete with new curriculum, materials and dedicated staff. A few years later, another strategic decision committed the organization to operating primary schools for the most disadvantaged children. In conjunction, these programs turned FIVDB into a center of expertise about how the poor learn. The organization, beginning with Zahin Ahmed's personal writings and leadership, has continuously collected ideas and explored methods to help adults and children to learn more and better. The Freires of the early years have been joined, in first-time translations of conceptual works into Bangla as much as in detailed training plans for teachers and facilitators, by the Vygotskys, Piagets and Putnams that inform the roadmap for a mature program decades later.

Chapter summary
This chapter gives a historical account of FIVDB's adult literacy program. It applies a periodization scheme that divides thirty-five years of program history into three major phases. Between 1976, the year when its precursor organization IVS began small literacy experiments, and 1982 when other NGOs began using the FIVDB training materials, a program with a distinct identity emerged. Key to this was a strategic decision in 1980 to take the lessons from experimenting with the curricula and materials that two other organizations had produced, and to apply those insights while creating FIVDB's own system from scratch. The testing was intense and resulted in a course that paid close heed to the conditions of the Sylhet region.

The second phase was one of expansion and public recognition. It stretched from 1982 to about 2001. During this period, not only did FIVDB's own literacy operations expand for more than ten years, also a considerable number of NGOs used its material in their literacy work. FIVDB's leading role was recognized by international education agencies and the government of Bangladesh, but the government appears to have stopped short of adopting FIVDB's approach in its informal education programs. FIVDB itself reached out to new learner groups, in geographic and social terms. Their expectations and the needs of the user NGOs required adaptations that detached curriculum and material from the specific Sylheti context.

Jonoshilon and the CLCs
Changes in FIVDB's donor portfolio and its own response to disappointing learner results ushered in the third phase defined by a severe drop in completed classes, a redesign of the
curriculum, reinforcement of post-literacy components, and, most importantly, the fusion of literacy training and grassroots organization. By 2008, most of the new classes were organized by CLCs. The standard of success has shifted from the demonstrated skills of individual learners to the sustainability of the CLCs and the effect that literacy work has for community development. A large new program centered on education efforts, Jonoshilon, boosted the foundings of new CLCs. With 691 of these village organizations able to host literacy courses, the number of learners shot to an all-time high in 2011. It will likely settle to modest levels as Jonoshilon draws to an end in December 2013, and the survival and future orientation of the CLCs will take centerstage in FIVDB's agenda.

The final section attempts an interpretation of the dynamics that drove the program history. The strategic decision to take complete control of curriculum development laid the foundation on which FIVDB has been able to grow, adapt and integrate the program. FIVDB started from a commonly shared philosophy - Freire's book and the values that it emphasized for educators and learners - and, alongside others in Bangladesh, translated it creatively into work routines. Through successful outreach to other NGOs with literacy programs, FIVDB rose to prominence in this field, plausibly because much larger agencies like BRAC were moving away into microfinance and primary education.

Operational success and network leadership fed on each other, securing donor support for the program to expand for a surprisingly long time, but also putting off pressures for radical innovation. When that support dwindled, FIVDB was able to reconfigure the program on the strength of its grassroots-organizing work. The literacy program, which in the early stages had functioned as the intake agent for other sectoral programs, thus migrated to the fold of poor people's organizations for which it had helped to prepare the ground.
Chapter 4: The Learners' Experience

A tapestry of many threads

This chapter gives voice to the learners in the FIVDB adult literacy program. Also, it reports opinions of non-learners that illuminate preferences for literacy training side-by-side with those for other types of community improvements.

The notion of "voice" is most appropriate for the experience that early learners and voluntary teachers shared with us - in biographic accounts and poignant episodes that highlight their becoming and remaining literate (or not) over considerable time spans in adult life. Interviews with 48 men and women inducted to the program between 1983 and 1997 produced a wealth of echoes from the spheres of personal, family and social change. Few of the noteworthy episodes can be generalized. Most are informative, either because they happened on the extreme edges of personal or group development, or because we presume them as typical signals of broader changes in Bangladesh, although we cannot measure how representative they were of the times.

The information gathered among more recent learners as well as in Community Learning Centers consists chiefly of data amenable to statistical treatment, enhanced with sundry interviewer observations and with rationales for preferring certain types of village projects to others. With some 270 recent learners we explored literacy motivations through self-assessed relative importance of, and personal ability in, five pre-defined uses. These formed a closed list, against which the learners expressed preferences by means of proportional piling, in analogy to an experiment earlier performed in Mozambique (Esposito, Kebede et al. 2011).

Recent learners, besides being agents (apparently fun-loving ones) in that exercise, were also the object of administrative data collection. For nearly 2,000 of them, we obtained scores from tests that the program had conducted at the end of the eight-month literacy courses. We used statistical models to account for score differences in terms of local environment, class performance, as well as household and personal attributes. We sought the opinion of informed staff members to help explain the considerable differences among districts, but hesitate to consider the full extent as real differences. There are problems with the sample and possibly systematic grading differences.

We believe we achieved modest methodological innovation through a budget simulation in which we engaged 33 CLC audiences. We were able to measure the relative importance of adult literacy training vis-à-vis other sectors in two ways - budget allocations (standardized to the mean project allocations by sector) and priority ranking. The discrimination, in terms of budget allocations, between priority projects and others is sharp enough to warrant some (unexpected) conclusions about the relative importance of adult literacy training.
The diverse datasets do not integrate smoothly, but major findings from them weave an instructive tapestry\(^5\). It is obvious that our findings are diminished by selection bias. We do not have corresponding measures about non-participants. Many individuals in the CLC budget exercise may not be learners in the direct sense, but these organizations were built around the very literacy theme. Their preferences cannot be considered independent from program selections.

This lacking puts any interpretations on shaky ground. We proceed anyway, with borrowings from what we learned in the context and history chapters. Our main line of reasoning is that the biographies of the learners, their motivations and their measured skills and the wider changes in the Bangladeshi society penetrate each other. We demonstrate, in the tales of the early learners and shebok / shebika, the confluence of age and of period effects. We presume a similar confluence in the more recent learners, who grew up in a media landscape distinct from that of the early generation.

**Difficult accounting of social awareness**

We should be upfront on another failing. The preceding chapters noted the importance of social analysis, and then, as a result, of social awareness in the learners as a mainstay of NGO literacy programs. Yet, with the exception of changes in health and hygiene as well as in education (they saw to it that their children received more), the memories of the early learners, as regards social awareness content, had faded almost completely. In our material regarding the recent learners and the CLCs, the social awareness observations look even more discolored.

We do not know whether this is a real effect of the program, or rather a chimera out of our toolbox. We are inclined to believe that the greater diversity and individualization of village society have changed the social awareness context, so much so that we have not found effective methods to tag distinct new knowledge, attitudes and actual behaviors to the literacy program. This is an interpretation papering over our lack of information in this regard, and should not be counted as evidence. In part, this may be a non-issue: the place of social analysis may have shifted from classes to the entire CLCs, and much of the content may nowadays be delivered by other sources, chiefly the mass media.

Some readers may feel that this chapter tells them everything about the consequences of literacy training, but they haven't had the chance to see any in progress. We therefore offer, as a prelude, a visit to one of our classes, in this case study of class interaction.

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**[Case study:] A morning in literacy class**

We arrive in time to join the Chandai Women Learners’ Group No. 3 to meet for their daily lesson at 10.30, after its members are done with the chores of the early morning. Chandai is a village in Sylhet District, and Group No. 3 is one of the adult literacy groups organized by its Community Learning Center. We walk up to a tarpaulin under a mango tree that seats fifteen learners,

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\(^5\) We interviewed the 48 ancient learners and volunteer teachers in September and October 2012. We conducted proportional piling experiments with 269 recent learners in December 2012 and January 2013. We conducted participatory budgeting exercises with 33 CLCs in February 2013.
together with four toddlers clinging to their mothers. We are greeted with a song, and after mutual introductions, the facilitator Ms Rahima Akter tells us what to expect.

**The lesson plan**

Today's meeting will be devoted to sharing some basic facts about the country, to learning two more letters of the alphabet, the spelling of nine words and three derivative words as well as to a basic arithmetic exercise. These are the elements of the lesson “No. 25: Drirha Oikka Rakho, Priyo Bangladesh Gorbo (We shall maintain strong unity and build up our dear Bangladesh)” prescribed in the first of the three FIVDB adult literacy primers.

Rahima holds up a map and asks learners to identify the country by its outline. That is easy. It is trickier to settle on a population figure; the learners advance estimates from 140 to 250 million. All agree that Bangladesh has "a lot of people". Similarly, there is no immediately accepted count of the administrative divisions, which is not surprising since one has been newly created. Rahima gently corrects some answers and offers some more facts on the country.

**Letter by letter, word by word**

The discussion goes on for about twenty minutes. "Bangladesh" then serves as one of the bridging words to the next segment, together with the word "strong" from the lesson's title. Rahima points to both of them on the flipchart. Bangladesh - exemplifies the "onushor" symbol ২ বাংলাদেশ pronounced as "-ng". From the word for "strong" (drirho, ঢীরো), Rahima extracts the letter for the aspirated retroflex "r" consonant (rho, রো). She asks for other words with these letters; the learners call out "shongshar" (household, family, domestic life) and "garho" (thick, deep, intense) and several more. Rahima unveils a chart of consonants; the learners find the onushor and the rho in the chart. The introduction and exemplary use of the new letters are done in twenty minutes; the learners rehearse them, in small groups, finding more words, for another ten.

Rahima reminds her students how syllables ending in "-a" are formed and stitched together into words. "pa" and "ta" yield "pata" (leaf). This is a prelude to spotting today's new letters within a longer written sentence. She shows the words one by one on flashcards, pronounces each word and has the students repeat after her before they are all presented in one long string. Rahima shuffles the flashcards, spreads them and has the words read out again. The learners recall those that are new in yet another setup - they underline instances in their primer books and are asked how many they found. They repeat this in small groups.

It is a quarter to noon by now. The learners take their exercise books and practice writing onushor and rho as well as some words containing these consonants. They work slowly; the writing of a few lines takes more than half an hour.
**Numbers take short shift today**

There is not much time and energy left to start the arithmetic session; the four toddlers, who have been good so far, are growing restive. But Rahima is adamant to instill at least a few new notions. Since the first one hundred natural numbers in Bangla have individual names, they cannot be simply guessed from the names for 1 to 9 and the multiples of ten. Today Rahima introduces the numbers 71 to 75. All know "shottor" (seventy). The leap to "ekattor" (seventy-one), "bahattor" (seventy-two), etc. is not straightforward (two is "duy", not "bah"); the learners count together with Rahima.

There are just a couple minutes left for some addition and multiplication, with the task taken this time from the household's food bill: "If the price of one liter of oil is Taka 25, and rice costs Taka 20 per kg, how much do we pay for four liters of oil and six kg of rice?" A learner offers an answer, which others doubt. Another learner comes up with the correct figure. She volunteers that she is married. Family life, she says, makes for keen budgeting, which is why she can calculate. It is understood that the first, incorrect answer came from an unmarried learner, who cannot be expected to have acquired this skill yet. The remark is particularly apposite because "shongshar" (family life) is one of the very words exhibiting the newly learned letter onushor!

**Personal testimonies**

It is 12.30 and high time to wind up. Ms Akter and her learners take eight minutes to recap the day's topics before most of them head home. Some stay to chat with us; we learn a number of interesting facets of their background and aspirations.
Thus, Nefula Begum, wife of a rickshaw puller and mother of two young girls, comes from a very poor family; she dropped out of primary class one and barely recalls how to sign her name. She wants to send her elder daughter to school next year. Nefula wants to be sure she can properly sign the admission and stipend forms by that time and help her daughter with homework. She is already teaching her the letters that she freshly learned in the adult class. With a bit of sparkle in her eyes, Nefula relates that the other day she was even able to spot an error in her own sister's writing. Also she is confident that with better reading skills she will be able to verify entries in the savings books that she keeps with two microfinance NGOs. Apart from these skills, as important as they are, she treasures the sense of bonding with other women in class and the ever new discoveries. It is only today, she points out, that she heard how big the population of Bangladesh was. Her ultimate dream for herself is to one day become a literacy facilitator like Rahima.

Selima Akter describes herself as an unmarried woman from a large household of ten. Both her parents are illiterate. They encouraged her to join the class; Selima in turn hopes to teach them how to properly sign their names. This by itself would raise her mother's social status, she believes, facilitating access to loans from NGOs in times of distress. Her father owns a mobile phone. He can receive calls, but cannot make any. With what she learns in class, Selima hopes she will be able to teach him the number signs.

Nefula, Selima and some bystanders excuse themselves, and we finally have a moment to listen to the facilitator. Rahima attended school up to class eight (lower secondary). She had taught this course twice before, having benefitted from basic training and refresher courses at FIVDB. However, this time the CLC considered several candidates, interviewed them and in the end selected her. In fact, one of the current learners, Fatema Begum, a CLC member, is one of the driving forces behind the creation of Chandai Women Learners' Group No. 3.

**Afterthoughts**

While some boys are rolling up the tarpaulin, we gratefully take leave from Rahima and the owners of the homestead with the mango tree. Many thoughts go through our minds, trying to put into context what we witnessed in the last two and half hours. Classes, whether of adults or of children, are events in which elementary human interaction, formal organization and the wider society penetrate each other most palpably. Here fifteen women - sixteen with Rahima - worked together for part of the morning, after the end of their early chores liberated them, and until fatigue, hunger, the need to cook lunch stopped them. This is the well known interference of biological and normative demands with the intimacy of personal interaction. All interactions end; society goes on. It is the formal organization - a web of previous and concurrent decisions - that holds interaction and society together: the CLC had decided to organize this group and to select Rahima as its teacher; FIVDB had decided that Lesson No. 25 must cover this and that and no more, so that the class can go through it within a period of time that was also the subject of some decision at some point. And fifteen women had decided to enroll and then each of them to appear for today's lesson.

That is all well understood, but where in it is the place of language and literacy, and the social consciousness that the teaching of literacy in adults is supposed to create? In this poor society, some of these things work well; others, though seemingly basic, cannot be taken for granted. Singing in the local dialect - there are many good songs and many gifted singers. Counting from 71 to 75 - among the poor excluded from school, not all can do it. Signing one's name - a mechanical operation for the literate, yet a coveted skill for the unschooled. They all need it, for social respect as well as for access to services that government, commercial firms and NGOs provide, but never without some hurdles. Finally, the view of the country at large - are we 140 or 250 million citizens of Bangladesh? Knowing the official census magnitude - is it just an entertaining factoid, is it a seed to grow the tree of knowledge, is it an addition to a sharpened consciousness that will help poor learners to stand their ground in dealing with better educated, more powerful groups?
Personal growth and social change

Initial circumstances

Environment
The learners and volunteer teachers who entered the FIVDB adult literacy world in the 1980s, and even some who joined it in the 1990s, were living among a majority of illiterate fellow villagers. In their own homes, many had grown up surrounded by family members none of whom had any experience with secular formal education. Others remained illiterate because their families could afford the schooling of some of their children only, or were lenient with those who disliked school.

Culturally, many communities held reservations against public education or, at least, did for a long time not recognize the value of girls' education. Girls who had missed out on primary school at an early age would find that norms of purdah worked against their participation in activities outside the home in adolescence and adult life. Presence in literacy class cast doubts on a young woman's reputation. Conservative communities rejected the format of the self-managing group of learners. In particular, they suspected FIVDB of Christian proselytizing, and its literacy materials as an obscure vehicle for it.

This culture prevailed in the homes of the illiterate, although to differing degrees. Stepmothers and some husbands were opposed to daughters and wives attending literacy classes; yet other husbands and mothers-in-law encouraged participation. The opposition arose from inner conviction, fear of high-status neighbors' taunts (which were often heaped on learners in the early years), or from sheer inability to redistribute child care and household chores.

Some learners and teachers experienced violence, particularly at the hands of enraged husbands, although it must be emphasized that this was rare, certainly in comparison to the frequency of verbal abuse. In some villages, learning material was burned. In others, councils of elders formally resolved to suppress literacy teaching; in one village, a shalish was convened to review the study material. The reviewers concluded that it contained nothing in opposition to Islam. Sometimes it was difficult to recruit learners because the illiterate adults themselves did not want to be openly recognized as such.

This opposition gave way gradually, plausibly in parallel with the growing recognition of the value of education in general and with the good example and success in life of the first generation of FIVDB learners in particular. In conservative areas, such as in the northern Upazilas of Sylhet District, unease with women meeting in literacy classes
outside their *bari* persists to this day. It is important to recognize that the motivations that drove individuals to seek literacy training, and others to dispense it to their fellow villagers, and the wider community to tolerate and finally request the trainings, have varied greatly. Yet they can be grouped into broad classes that emerge from the historic accounts.

**Motivations**

**The stigma of being illiterate**

While poor people in some occupations get away, technically, without formal literacy operations, there is a strong stigma attached to being an illiterate adult. The stigma manifests itself most burningly in the act of thumb-printing on a document, among people who are unable to sign their names. Learners remember shameful occasions when they were taunted as illiterates - or worse: A young woman was rejected as a suitable bride when the groom's party coming to negotiate the marriage terms found out that she was illiterate. Another woman felt intense shame when she could not sign her name in the marriage registry, yet another for having to print her thumb on the stipend receipt in the school of her daughter. A man felt humiliated when he was asked about the name of a movie that he had just watched, and had to say that he could not read its title.

Insults were suffered not only from officials who recognized the low social status in the citizen's illiteracy, or from strangers inconvenienced by requests for information. Even family members could be rude, particularly when the type of document that exceeded the illiterate member was a bone of contention, such as over land ownership.

The effects of the stigma could in part be anticipated. Some contemplated their marriage prospects in this light. A man joined the class in hopes of finding "a better wife". A young woman who, as a child, had dropped out of primary class 2 was reminded by her mother that she might find a better husband if it were known that she was literate. For those already married to better educated women - a not infrequent situation -, going to literacy class presumably was a redeeming catch-up move.

**Dignity over honor**

The overarching concept in which the flight from stigma may be interpreted is the rise of personal dignity over conventions of social conformity and family honor. While many of the learners did not aspire to advanced literacy, they had a burning desire to be able to sign their names. The act of signing documents was and is the manifested key distinction of the literate person. For many of the poorer learners, particularly the older, their motivation starts and ends here - once sure that they can sign their names, they do not manifest strong desires to add literate skills. The scope to practice them remains circumscribed by the circumstances of the day-to-day survival struggle.

**Personal access to holy texts**

The direct, personal access to holy texts was an important motivator for some of the learners to strive for the necessary reading skills in adult life. Whether they wanted to
read in a most private, inner sphere, for personal edification, for greater respectability in
their families, or for recitation at festivals and public functions is of secondary concern.

Insecurity reduction
The terrible insecurity that, according to Amartya Sen (op.cit.), befalls the illiterate and
innumerate is plainly obvious in the accounts of our early learners. The illiterate live in
pervasive fear of being cheated. Their fear is paralyzing to a degree beyond what
particular instances of fraud might justify. A woman relating an attempt to swindle her
out of her land added: "I was deceived all my life".

Whether the fear is exaggerated or not, it is a fact of life. It is reinforced by common
knowledge that fraud crystallizes around certain occasions at which the illiterate are
vulnerable: the writing and registration of land deeds, the calculation and payment of
wages, the allocation and delivery of relief. Women who run weekly or monthly tabs at
local shops often feel that the shop owners take advantage of their illiteracy, overcharging
or shortchanging them, to the point where one of our respondents got into a fight with the
man across the counter. From the learners' tales it is clear that business partners, even
family members, are not above taking advantage of those who cannot read, count, or
properly sign. When family members fail in business, cheating is a frequent explanation.
An acute contemporary variety of cheating on the illiterate, or the insufficiently literate,
lurks in the documents that accompany the international migrant labor contracting.

In more generic terms, the illiterate not only are unable to read a document, they are often
helpless in assessing its relevance in the first place. The story of the hapless woman who
used her husband's incoming business letters for kindling in her kitchen made this point
forcefully6.

That illustrates insecurity in the face of inscrutable documents. The learners were
undermined by insecurity also outside the realm of documents. Before becoming literate,
they used to move in public places with little confidence. Travel was difficult, a bus
terminal disorienting. Several of our interviewees volunteered that hospitals and medical
chambers were particularly hard for the illiterate to navigate. Some made a conscious
decision to enroll in literacy classes in order to build their self-confidence in the public
sphere. The difficulty to open a bank account or to get on the voter list as long as one was
perceived as illiterate too was reinforced by fears; to overcome that fear, one had to
become literate.

Privacy and personal independence
Even when the other people are perfectly honest, depending on them for literacy
operations carries a financial and emotional cost. In generic terms, what transpires from
learners' accounts is the will to reduce literacy mediation. Having letters read by
neighbors mars the intimacy of what spouses dare to write to each other. Being able to
read and write letters unaided helps the quality of married life as well as one's status in
family and neighborhood.

6 The story figures prominently in a review exercise in the year 2000, in which the "appreciative inquiry"
method provoked learners to share this and similarly poignant stories.
At first sight, therefore, it may appear a paradox that, while literacy promotes personal sovereignty, it can be used also to deepen social control. This is particularly true of the supervision of one's school-going children's homework, another strong motivation driving adults into FIVDB's literacy classes. Homework supervision is a favorite form of active parenting, echoed in the frequent complaints that the lack of electricity in the village makes it hard for children to study in the evenings. Whether neo-literate parents hope to build their own literacy skills further by working with their children through government school textbooks, or whether some parents remain vigilant about content suitable to their religious and familial convictions, our material cannot answer.

**Gateway to economic progress**

Expectations of immediate financial gain from literacy do not seem common among the learners. They occur sometimes among already literate young women needing to earn money. This was one of the motives why some applied to be shebika, mingled with the desire to serve the wider community and to make practical use of their literate skills.

Many of the early learners, however, did entertain hopes for indirect benefits. They perceived literacy as the pre-requisite to loans and trainings, particularly where trainees were expected to count, measure and take notes. Literacy was also seen by some as a means to improve an already existing skill, for example sewing as a business, or the status of a traditional birth attendant (TBA). The competitive microfinance market has severed the link between literacy training and access to loans. Hopes to find access to training more easily may be a lingering motivation in some of the present-day learners.

Being literate could not only *earn* money, it helped to *save*. Helping the children with schoolwork as long as possible delayed the need for private tutoring; price comparisons in shopping lowered the cost of household and business inputs; tracking loan balances improved expenditure projections while lowering the risk of manipulation.

The literate know how to keep accounts, of the household or a business (the two most often are barely separate). As a woman put it, being literate "helped me to run my little shop properly". Not uncommonly, women who acquired their literacy in FIVDB classes would later do the accounts for the small businesses of their illiterate husbands. And, with overseas workers' remittances being a key determinant of economic mobility in the village, insight into migrant labor contract documents is a benefit for the literate worker.

The motivations for becoming literate are varied and mixed. They too are learned, not least by observing the effects that literacy had on previous learners and on the educated in general.
Individual effects

The learning itself

Liberation

Apart from enduring technical skills that learners take away from the literacy courses and apart from the value of the substantive knowledge that the courses impart, the learning process itself has its benefits.

Some learners found the group learning experience liberating. It was liberating not because of the group nature of much of village life, but despite it. The literacy class, as Maddox (op.cit.) pointed out, provided a sheltered ambiance in which debate of current social evils and visions of better futures could be spun freely from familial and village social status considerations. The learners' recollections of literacy class are happiest when they dwell on instances of situational humor, on the freedom of joking and the liberal singing that spiced the lessons. In other words, the literacy courses promoted communication styles that were new, yet culturally manageable for the learners.

For some, the literacy courses yielded communication skills that held them in good stead later on. A female learner who also worked as a shebika attributed her elevation to the Union Council years later to how she had learned to listen and talk in literacy class. A father claimed to help his children with their school problems much better because, as an FIVDB learner, he had been exposed to a non-academic learning style.

Literacy training may, for some individuals, be a time for coming of age, a conscious act of releasing a repressed potential. A former shebika recalled that she had been a good student in primary school. She was offered a scholarship to continue her education, but was stopped by her father. She became a shebika as a way to compensate for her loss.

Content retention

With our material we are not in a position to map which of the social-awareness messages were retained, by whom, for how long, and with what practical consequences. In the learners' and shebikas' recollections, however, a particular topical area stands out to which they credit the most enduring insights. This is the region covering health, hygiene and sanitation. Personal and environmental hygiene, curative as well as preventive health-seeking behaviors were learned with, it seems, some durable effects. Hygienic latrines, the preference for proper doctors over village quacks, vaccinations for children are cited multiple times. One learner commented on the process of learning: before the literacy course she did not pay much heed to health and hygiene-related messages from any source. The fact that the textbook featured some, and the class discussed them, gave new authority to the entire subject area; she became more receptive, whoever the source.

Other competencies that one might expect firmly established in successful learners make rare appearances only. Some refer to more abstract competencies; expressions for such are, for example, "overall development understanding", "better listening", the "ability to work anywhere". Some learners credit their literacy for their greater ability to connect
and appreciate information from different sources, such as from TV programs and health worker visits.

Proponents of rights-based approaches will be disappointed to note that durable references to their semantic field are rare. They do occur, in scattered tangents to early marriage prohibition, family planning and keener awareness of rights. In the interviews with the old learners, a single instance was recorded in which one of them would mention dowry, a topic that was emphasized as a social evil in the Bangladesh adult literacy community of the 1980s, including FIVDB’s.

Limitations
The early learners are very much aware of their limitations and speak of some of them openly.

As much as many of them went to literacy class in order to better support the education of their children, they all say that they could effectively supervise homework only for the lower grades of primary school, and only in less demanding subjects. This has not diminished the resolve to keep their children studying beyond primary school. There are social and technical limitations too, some rooted in the modern vehicles of literacy themselves. Handling SMSs on mobile phones is typically left to the younger generation (who may find a new sphere of privacy in this very incompetency of their elders). The early learners were not exposed to the English alphabet, which FIVDB included as a subject in recent literacy courses for adolescents only.

The relapse into de-facto illiteracy is frequent and freely admitted. Among those who stopped to read and write, most point out that they can still sign, the key distinction from illiterate persons. Some retain the ability to read religious texts, but little else. Without discounting explanations that muster neurological processes (Abadzi 2003; Abadzi 2012), diminished eyesight in the middle-aged and elderly, or the lack of regular practice in the lives of the poor, we favor a different line. We believe that many of the early learners lost their skills after transferring the tasks performed with them to others. We will revert to this.

Typical usage of literacy skills
Literacy usage can be classified by tasks, situations and/or competencies. The early learners and shebika responded chiefly in terms of what they still read, write and calculate. That these operations are mixed in certain tasks such as accounting is obvious, and our separate enumerations are in part artificial.

Reading
Learners employ their reading skills regularly to clocks and watches, newspapers and, for those in offices and business, to work-related documents. Occasionally, they read personal letters, product information, and medical prescriptions. The importance of reading religious texts has already been noted. We observe a generation gap such that mature learners read religious books, some also storybooks, whereas the reading of younger household members is limited to school textbooks. Rarely did households own
any other types of reading material. The fully-fledged novel, a liberator of the independent mind in early Western modernity, was not mentioned.

With the increased presence of school books, product flyers and TV shows with subtitles, the situation is different, at least by degree, from the one Philip Coombs described for rural Bangladesh in the late 1970s: "Many rural areas are utterly devoid of reading material; they are essentially oral societies" (Coombs 1985: 278; as quoted by Jennings 1990: 219). The mobile phone may be the latest in a series of changes fostering both orality and a special art of reading and writing.

Many learners moved from passive to active literacy intermediation. The same persons who had depended on others to read them circulars and letters, once noticed for good reading skills, were then approached by friends and neighbors to intercede in written communications.

**Writing**

It is less evident what kinds of writing are practiced regularly. Some learners make shopping lists; others write personal letters. Others, on the strength of their writing, came to fill clerical functions in civil society offices or for local businesses. One former shebok described himself as the manager of a local investment company. Some stayed within the FIVDB ambit, running village libraries, writing CLC and school management committee resolutions, or representing local associations to Union Councils.

The overall impression is that learners actively writing were outnumbered by those only practicing reading. This is vaguely in line with the finding from the Bangladesh Literacy Survey 2010 that we reported in the opening chapter (BBS 2011: op.cit.). A writing episode may be so extraordinary that each one is remembered almost as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. A woman remembered, "I once wrote a letter to my husband."

**Calculation**

Calculations are extremely frequent. In cash payments, bills and change are figured. Most of these operations are sporadic; they vanish in the past, without trace, as soon as completed. Other forms leave deeper memories because operationally they are chained to the results of their preceding instances. Many learners keep simple accounts that span payments and receipts over a period of time. They have learned to keep track of household expenses. Small business owners keep accounts particularly to stay on top of customers who buy from them on credit. Other learners have been entrusted with the accounts of local associations such as mosque committees.

A frequent type of calculation concerns loan balances among members of microfinance borrower groups. Similarly, learners who work for wages learn to calculate what is due to them and check their pay against their claims.

**Student homework supervision**

The use of adult literacy skills in supporting one's children in school is worth repeating. As long as the parents feel that they can master the contents, they will probably read a
good part of it (and correct mistakes in good time). When the matter exceeds their understanding, they may instead monitor external markers - hours worked, concentration, tidiness and legibility - and arrange for older children, neighbors and private tutors to give substantive support. As they grow older, some of the learners report the pleasure of teaching their grandchildren.

**Learner, household and community**

*Inner life*

The literate life unfolds in spheres that move outwards from the learner herself, to her household, and hence to larger collectivities such as the local community, its associational life as well as agencies of commerce and employment that recruit some of the learners eventually.

The newly literate are affected in their inner lives. Religious books, read for personal edification, most readily open symbolic worlds that are felt individually and privately. Story books create fictitious realities, on the canvas of a plot that has a beginning, a middle and an ending. The stories train empathy, the capacity of mentally taking on new roles in the joys and struggles of others whom we do not (or not yet) know personally, but with whom we identify as social types. The manifestations are diverse:

- One of the learners, a man, had grown up in a middle-class home that boasted many books. He did not go to school and later felt a burning regret that he could not read books, nor use the knowledge stored in them in order to help his children in school.
- A former shebika, a women of good fortune, had traveled in India. She marveled at the ease with which people there were using the English language. Seeing these possibilities of expressing something beyond one's customary language, she decided upon her return to Bangladesh to work for the FIVDB literacy program. In retrospect, she felt that literacy was good for rational decisions as well as for personal dignity.
- A former shebok, once involved in a theater group, continues to read drama scripts, for his own pleasure. In a similar artistic vein, a woman joined the literacy class because she wanted to write down the lyrics of new songs.

One would also assume that learners feel satisfaction from the mere fact that they learn new classificatory schemes. A woman admitted to her joy of being able to understand different diseases that might befall her ducks (instead of naively assuming that there existed only one duck disease), and to write their names and the names of the drugs in point.

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**Sidebar:** The pleasure of learning new classifications

Some of the older learners testified how much pleasure they felt at certain "Heureka!" moments. In literacy classes and in village libraries they would experience an intellectual and emotional breakthrough when old matter suddenly appeared in new light.
The modern media landscape may change the equation between literacy and inner life. The mobile phone, apart from minimal skills to operate a handset and manage the subscription, offers cheap voice communication, even internationally. That and ample choice of TV programs free a richer personal and family life from dependence on written text and printed image. The early learners achieved their literacy before this era, but the ubiquity of mobile telephony and television are affecting the utility of their literacy skills at this mature point.

**Prestige and honor**

While purdah norms discouraged participation in public classes, literacy, once acquired, would gain the learner prestige and honor. The most immediate benefit came from shedding the stigma of illiteracy in the act of signing one's name. Learners reported also that their skills earned them greater respect inside their families. Literate women enjoyed greater mobility and influence in household decision-making. The ability to recite religious texts tended to lift women's respectability (Maddox 2005).

It is unknown whether, beyond and above the basic status of a literate person, increasing reading and writing skills would keep imparting higher prestige on ordinary learners. One of our observations would indicate that it does: A male learner in Sylhet city was so well trusted that he became not only the cashier for the local mosque committee but also the steward of private savings for some of his neighbors. Higher social prestige is more commonly attached to the shebok / shebika. Particularly the longer serving female teachers earned themselves lasting affections from their entire village communities. Some were later elected to CLC executive committees or even Union Councils (see below).
We believe that literacy favors the acquisition of social capital. Our argument is common-sensical and anecdotal, for lack of a stringent comparison with the careers of illiterate persons. In the villages of our learners, one of the most common pathways to higher social capital is through membership in multiple microfinance groups and the leadership positions that such groups offer. Less frequent, but more valuable are positions of elected office in local government, of employment or voluntary service in civil society and in development programs. Some of the more successful learners did in fact run careers connecting a series of such positions, in ways some of the poor transition to the middle class.

In a typical example, a married woman, originally educated to class 5, enrolled in the FIVDB savings and loan program in 1990, at age 30. Two years later, she began working as shebika, in order to supplement her household income. She graduated into work as health promoter and library facilitator. By 2003 she was elected to the Union Parishad and served in this capacity for eight years. She currently is the cashier of a government-sponsored club for women farmers. The interviewer rated her household middle-class.

One ought to be wary of extrapolating too much from this and other examples of learners and shebika who rose to the pinnacles of Union Councils and other influential stations in their communities. There are contrasting cases of participants who cycled through multiple NGO trainings, volunteer stints and even lowly frontline worker jobs, without ever exiting from their poverty.

A 57-year old widow, initially taken in by the FIVDB savings and loan program, served in at least three NGOs, including as a literacy shebika. Our interviewers found her in very poor circumstances, yet happy that her two married daughters had studied for some years beyond primary school. One senses from this and other life stories that adult literacy training helps to transfer ambitions to the next generation, by heightening the value of education and the sacrifices for one's children to get more of it.

Similarly, spontaneous attempts at organization by the neo-literates seem to be rare. A woman who attended literacy class in 1998 formed a small local cooperative, presumably an independent savings-and-loans club, with others in her village. The group is still functioning. Protests against wage cuts were recalled by some; whether these were more than individual reactions is not clear.

One of the strongest drivers of social differentiation in village society is the household's access to overseas employment. One would expect that families growing richer from expatriate remittances will convert some of their financial capital into social capital. Literacy helps rising families to communicate with husbands, sons and brothers abroad (by letter or phone), with banks and land registrars at home, and with agencies that will convey yet other members to places of employment, study or family reunion.
A model of skills transitions

Almost universally, we observe a striking regularity among the older learners and shebok/shebika: the member of the younger generation in the household with the highest number of years of schooling has more formal education than they themselves or their spouses. Exceptions are rare and partial. We met a mother who attended the literacy course together with her eldest daughter. Neither of them had ever gone to school. Even so, the younger children at the point of the interview were in school.

The headway between the two generations is the outcome of the massive educational expansion that Bangladesh has managed in recent decades. As a learner observed, nowadays "there is a graduate in almost every household". To this advanced degree, it may hold for a minority of areas only; as a nutshell characterization, it is pertinent.

At the same time, we notice widespread loss of reading and writing practice among the older learners and shebika. For some, poor eyesight is forbidding. More commonly, we were told that, as their children grew to be mature adults and educated daughters-in-law joined the household, the responsibility of keeping accounts and of other writing tasks was increasingly shared with, and finally handed over to, the younger generation. Some male learners related that their better educated wives, members of borrower groups, kept track of loan balances anyway (implying that in the process their wives did all the business accounting for them).

Figure 4: Competency over time in the learner and in her children

Some of the reading ability is retained more deliberately. "I can still read the Holy Quran", one of the learners stressed, who must have learned to read Arabic in a madrasa. By and large, however, we witness an intergenerational transfer of competency. It happens at the confluence of an age effect (poor eyesight in the elderly, disengagement
and succession in the household) with a *period effect* (expanding education in the
country). If we want to interpret the loss of practice as relapse into illiteracy, then it
should be attributed to opportunity - the young generation is waiting to take responsibility
- rather than to original limitations in the learners or in the literacy curriculum.

**The normative environment**

*Insecurity reduction itself a normative theme*

Illiteracy means insecurity, something terrible, A. Sen says, not waiting to happen, but
which has already happened. There are numerous, if as yet poorly connected, hints in the
accounts of learners and shebika that literacy changes the norms under which society
tackles insecurity. These normative effects obviously emanate from the educational
expansion at large, not just from the aspirations of FIVDB's participants.

Several of the learners took out life insurance. While the concept of formal insurance is
not widely taught in schools (perhaps students of commerce are the only ones to hear
about it), notions of risk and risk reduction are gaining a stronger foothold in the better
educated society. Our learners affirmed that the literacy classes strengthened the case for
vaccinating all children, for replacing village quacks with certified physicians, for
checking expiry dates on drugs purchased in local pharmacies.

The learners generally presume that they and other literate persons fall prey to cheating
less readily. In part, that may be naïve, as the ruin of middle-class families, albeit quite
well educated, at the hands of fraudulent labor agents demonstrates. In other aspects, such
as the checking of loan balances by literate borrowers, the protection that literacy offers
is real. Yet, instances of actual protest behavior when neo-literate persons were able to
pinpoint fraudulent behavior seem to be rare. One of our learners objected to a factory
owner who short-changed her on wages. Some indicated that their literacy helped them to
foil evil plans to rob their land.

*Risk society*

It is difficult to distill a common denominator from these disparate behaviors. With some
speculation, one may argue that Bangladesh has evolved an awareness of being part of
the global "risk society" (Beck 1992; Sen, Hulme et al. 2004; Atkins, Hassan et al. 2007).
Among the FIVDB learners, the notion may be taking root that literacy and continuous
learning are necessary to survive in the risk society.

If that sounds too speculative, the least we can say is that adult literacy learners and
others alike agree on the necessity of educating all children. There is a consensus,
although not the financial means for everybody, to educate them beyond primary school.
Demands for the English alphabet to be included in the adult literacy curriculum have
grown. That, the long-distance communications with family members abroad, as well as
the uses of literacy not only for economic ends, but also for the cultivation of an inner life
- all that points to a tighter connection between adult literacy and modernity.
Both are risky - the learner may wind up in an envied Union Council seat or in newly illiterate anonymity - modern Bangladesh offers riches for some and reserves disaster for others. Literacy does not do away with risks; it makes it easier to navigate around them.

**The structure of literacy skills**

Above we enumerated motivations for, and uses of, literacy that older learners and volunteer teachers would typically evoke. To some extent, the prominence and coherence of attitudes are known also among more recent learners. These entered the FIVDB program in an era distinct in many ways from the youthful days of the organization. Since 2009, literacy training has been, at the grassroots, in the hands of the CLCs; nevertheless the expansion of training has followed programmatic imperatives in the NGO.

**Using literacy**

For the individual learner, this dialectic may not be manifest. The learners talk of their literacy uses in everyday language, not in academic or corporate notions. These invade their space through the organized literacy classes, such as when a test is administered at the end of the course. We have tried to obtain learner competencies in both realms, in self-perceived everyday operations as well as in formal testing. We asked some 250 learners to indicate the relative importance of five common literacy uses, and evaluate their own abilities across them. Separately, we accessed a subsample of test results and linked the learners' scores to household and village data collected in earlier baseline surveys.

**Importance and ability**

This graph represent importance and ability approximated through a proportional piling exercise in which interviewees each distributed fifty tokens over five uses. Our setup followed one earlier pioneered in Mozambique (Esposito, Kebede et al. 2011), with a closed set of choices. We asked the learners to distribute the tokens twice, once to reflect the importance that they attached to each use, and then to express their own personal abilities. For many, this distinction was difficult; several insisted that for them all five uses were equally important. They did agree that their ability to practice literacy skills varied.
In the event, the mean number of tokens placed on the five flashcards showed an almost identical rank order for both importance and ability. Overall, the learners found helping their children with school work the most important application of their new literacy, followed by signing their names instead of thumb impressions, calculations, dealing with documents, and, with a considerable drop, the use of mobile phones.

Such raw frequencies by themselves are almost meaningless. They depend on the sample; among the 266 recent learners doing this exercise, only 49 were men. Moreover, it is plausible that tokens are distributed over two, three uses that relate to the same underlying concept. Interviewees struggling how many tokens to allocate to each of them may make substitutions that are almost arbitrary. For example, calculation, documents and mobile phone may all be particularly important to learners who run small businesses. To test for such associations, we used appropriate statistical procedures.

Three clusters

The five uses for which we elicited self-ratings were essentially reduced to three clusters. Helping one's children is a competency relatively isolated from others. The abilities to sign one's name and to do calculations move together. Coping with documents and using the mobile phone are more closely associated between them than with other skills.

Attitudes and abilities should be expected to be accentuated in line with learners' life stages and social standing. However, we find little in the way of significant association with measured personal and village attributes. Not surprisingly, helping children was

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7 A variant of principal component for compositional data (Aitchison 1986), implemented with the CoDaPack software (Thió-Henestrosa and Comas 2011).
more pronounced among women; this ability also followed its own course with age, at first increasing, and later decreasing, with the passage of children through school. Higher village literacy tended to promote greater importance for the (combined) calculation, document use and mobile phone; this score sum was higher also among men and among those with some prior schooling. One may speculate that high-literacy villages are better integrated into bureaucratic sectors of the market economy. But this is contradicted by the statistical tendency for learners in Sylhet District, an area more advanced than some other sample districts, to place less importance on that cluster, for reasons unexplained.

All in all, the self-rated importance and ability scores tell us little in the way of associations with social structure. There are no significant differences alongside poverty and gender, save the above-mentioned higher relative ability among female learners to help their children, and among men the slightly higher skills akin to business.

**Administrative data: Test scores**

To some extent, that changes when we look at the structure of test scores. Tests elicit information in artificial settings that are external to everyday life. At the end of the eight-month long course, the learners undergo a written test of their reading, writing, and arithmetic skills as well as of some knowledge items cast in the perspective of the "social awareness" that the literacy acquisition is supposed to impart. The learners' answers are graded on a scale from 0 to 25 for each of the four examined domains. We had access to a subsample of 1,951 test records. They were selected because data entry personnel in field offices had cared to note the household numbers used in a preceding village baseline survey. This allowed us to link test results of approx. 1,780 learners to household and community variables.

**Writing - an enduring challenge**

From the analysis of this combined dataset, several findings emerged. On a purely descriptive level, the mean scores are lowest for writing, and highest for social awareness. This is not surprising. There is anecdotal evidence that many learners finish their training with negligible writing skills. Yet, the differences may be largely due to the way the test instrument was scripted, and the papers were graded. Particularly the social awareness part is taken leniently, with hardly any marks given lower than 10. We are thus not concerned with the absolute differences in grades between skills areas, but rather with the response of each to the learner's attributes and environments.

**Differences among districts**

We first note considerable differences among the sample districts. It was plausible that literacy classes in the newer working areas should produce less favorable results. The data do not confirm consistent differences between districts with longer adult literacy tradition in FIVDB and those in which classes were only begun under the Jonoshilon project. There are, however, differences also among the old working-area districts, with Sylhet scoring significantly lower. This table arranges mean scores by district and subject.
Table 5: Literacy test results, by district and subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Learners</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Calculating</th>
<th>Social awareness</th>
<th>Total score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old areas:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maulvibazar</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunamganj</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>57.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New areas:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habiganj</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kisoreganj</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netrokona</td>
<td>659</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>68.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>1,951</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>1,919</td>
<td>1,918</td>
<td>1,918</td>
<td>1,915</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,915</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of these differences may be due to correlated measurement error, such as when supervision in certain areas was lacking, and the grading there was consistently more lenient. However, senior staff who know the lay of the land have pointed to real circumstances that account for some of the differences.

In Maulvibazar, for example, staff turnover for a long time was minimal, and supervision was strong. The sample in Sylhet District is biased towards conservative regions, with male supervisors forbidden to visit female classes, female supervisors hard to recruit and retain, and teachers therefore poorly supported. Sunamganj is more or less split, in its attitudes towards adult literacy, along an east-west divide, with the eastern part copying Sylhet's challenges. In Upazilas further west, such as Tahirpur, immigrants from Netrokona show strong desire to improve their literacy. After the big harvest in March, these communities are idle during the high-flood season, with enough time on their hands to attend classes. In Netrokona, similar factors are at work favoring stronger learning. In Kisoreganj, by contrast, flourishing poultry and embroidery industries tend to frustrate regular study among the gainfully employed.

**Effects of personal and environmental characteristics**

Those findings are local. Others are of greater substantive interest. Foremost among them is the absence of significant effects of gender, age, marriage status and CLC membership. The effect of the village poverty rate is insignificant; that of the learner's own household's poverty is almost negligible. Among the 52 percent poor and 14 percent ultra-poor learners in the effective sample, the scores in all skill areas are lower than among the 10 percent rich and 23 percent middle-class learners. But the differences measure less than one point, compared to rich learners. One might suspect that the poor are more often absent from classes, and that greater absenteeism would mask the poverty effect. However, mean attendance is virtually the same across wealth ranks.
Significant effects on test scores result from attendance, prior literacy and, for calculation skills only, the literacy rate of the village. In this table, we display the marginal effects of changes in variables that showed significant effects in any of the skills areas. The figures mean increases / decreases in test scores.

Table 6: Changes in test scores in response to effort, personal and village characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills area</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Calculations</th>
<th>Social awareness</th>
<th>Total score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days attended</td>
<td>[if increased by one SD = 20.2 days]</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and household characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could sign name</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some primary school</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[compared to illiterate]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle-class</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poor</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>-0.91</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ultra-poor</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.97</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>-0.89</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[compared to rich]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate</td>
<td></td>
<td>[if increased by one SD = 14.5 percent points]</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Estimates from models that retain only statistically significant variables.

The marginal effects indicate two tendencies. First, the effects of characteristics that chiefly are personal - days attended, prior literacy - are stronger than household and village influences - poverty and the literacy rate.

*We would need to modify this statement immediately if we could trust that the differences among districts and among literacy classes are entirely real. The estimated penalty for being a learner in Sylhet District is a whopping 9.5 points in the total test score; the class effects have a standard deviation of almost*
Where is the social awareness?

Second, the effects on social awareness scores are much smaller than those on the scores of the classic "3R" subjects - reading, writing, arithmetic. This is particularly relevant for the training effort; a learner showing up in class for twenty more days can be expected to gain a third of a point for her social awareness, versus almost a full point for her writing. There is a consensus that the test instrument for social awareness is weak. But even allowing for this, one has to ask what the reasons for the low response to training might be. Plausible candidates are:

- the learners are not interested;
- they know most of the messages beforehand, from long exposure to NGO work or from alternative sources;
- the training is poor in this area, either because the volunteer teachers are not competent, or because the other subjects displace it;
- the teachers are extra lenient in grading social awareness questions.

FIVDB's senior staff gravitate towards the last option. They have been aware for several years that the test instrument was poor. They have been delaying its revision because operational issues took the front seat. Regardless, the results indicate a weakness in the actual delivery of adult literacy training. The social awareness part has been constituent from the inception of FIVDB's program. If the tests suggest that learners are not responsive in this skills area, then either literacy has atrophied to purely technical skills, or FIVDB has greater difficulty observing and describing social awareness among poor communities.

The latter possibility is evident in the correlations among the scores of the four skills areas. Reading, writing and calculation are closely correlated. Their association with the social awareness scores is weaker. This is the result also of how social awareness is graded. This diagram compares the detailed distributions between reading and writing, as well as between reading and social awareness scores.

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that size, some 8.4 points. But the possibility of systematic grading differences across districts and classes advises against extending the comparison to these levels.
Both sunflower diagrams have their centers of gravity in the upper right quadrant. Nevertheless, in the reading and writing chart, a substantial presence in the lower left - students who scored weakly in both subjects - makes for a fairly strong correlation (0.57). In social awareness, the base score practically is ten points. Except at the high end of the reading range, there isn't much of an increase in awareness scores. The correlation is weaker (0.33).

**Do testing and social awareness go together?**

This is the place to suspend the statistical argument and return to the meaning systems in the learners' lives. Testing for reading, writing, and arithmetic may be relatively acceptable, valid and reliable. These areas have cultural counterparts that are well established in the many villages, at least in those with schools or close to schools. Everyone knows that some people read, write and calculate better than others do, and that for students, this is the subject of evaluations by teachers, tutors, peers and parents. Eventually some of the evaluations determine graduations to the next level of education.

Social beliefs - whether wife-beating is acceptable, sandals should be worn in the bathroom area, trees are essential for a livable community - will also be evaluated, and their bearers will be perceived as more or less enlightened. However, there is hardly a cultural template available for testing social awareness, and even less so for judgments expressed numerically (such as in test grading). For social awareness, there is no counterpart to graduation from one level of education to the next. The progression from illiterate to learner, and hence to volunteer and later to NGO fieldworker is a weak substitute for formal careers. Not only are the transition rates much smaller; even the few
who do advance beyond the learner status do so probably because their formal skills are more impressive than their demonstrated social awareness.

In this regard, adult literacy training finds itself in a cultural bind. It needs to demonstrate impact, but its attempts to instill social awareness elements in the poor and disadvantaged do not square well with grading individuals. Impact is much easier to see in the technical subjects, where both learners and teachers agree on true and false, correct and incorrect, and accept the test format.

**The cost of routinization**

True as that may be, it is no excuse for not trying to get a better handle on what the literacy training achieved, or failed to achieve, in social awareness creation. Once convinced that the test-based evaluation did not work in this area, FIVDB should have dropped the social awareness-related questions from the test papers.

Since CLC members were already accustomed to write stories for wall magazines, it would have been easy to harness this production to a system of evaluating social awareness changes. Stories could have been collected, selected and reviewed at subsequently higher levels of the organization, following a format similar to the "Most Significant Change" approach (Dart and Davies 2003). With some patient experimenting during the early years of Jonoshilon, systematic evaluation of learner stories would likely have produced an informative assessment of social awareness changes by 2012, early enough in the project cycle to chart some directions during the upcoming transition phase.

The insistence on continuing a failed measurement tool is a superb illustration of bureaucratic routine. From a Freirean background, it seems particularly disturbing.\(^9\)

**The public valuation of literacy skills**

Hitherto, we interpreted the response of completed learners. We did not observe non-learners and have limited data on drop-outs. Our findings thus are at the mercy of uncontrolled selection effects. For example, we know nothing about the importance that various literacy uses hold for adults who acquired their literacy in the formal education system.

**The Community Learning Centers**

The CLCs, who became the major platform of literacy training in 2009, help us to narrow our ignorance, if only by degrees and from their particular viewpoint. These views are privileged by the CLCs’ ongoing operational and philosophical proximity with FIVDB. They are thus not representative of the attitudes that the wider Bangladeshi society may hold towards literacy in general and adult literacy training in particular.

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\(^9\) In Bangladesh, story-based monitoring was pursued, for some years, by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) (Sarker and Bloem 1996). CCDB eventually abandoned it for the reason that most likely discouraged experimenting with alternative methods of the Jonoshilon monitoring: the pressures of reporting against the quantitatively defined indicators of the project logframe. The CCDB, however, did not have the advantage of a well-functioning adult literacy training hierarchy.
**CLC elites and adult literacy learners**

Information from the CLCs has to be taken with caution. In 2012, the CLCs had an estimated 83,596 members. As many as 6,187 sat on executive committees (among them 2,224 were women). The status alignment along gender, education, household wealth and officer status within the committee is strong, as the graph below shows. Of the 265 committee members in the 33 CLCs visited, only 15 had attended adult literacy courses. In the education panel of the graph below, those 15 are placed at the bottom of the influence hierarchy ("functional literacy"). They are there because most of them (12) were women, and most were poor and ordinary committee members.

This implies three things: Most of the EC members are not recruited from the pool of learners and thus speak from a different perspective. Second, the literacy training does generate some vertical mobility in the village society, but this is modest. And finally: The commitment of prominent speakers to the concerns of the less powerful in the community must not always be taken for granted.

*Figure 7: Status alignment in CLC executive committees*

We do not have specific information on this, but it is plausible that the interface between CLCs and FIVDB is structurally similar to the grassroots - NGO transition zone that is common in much of rural Bangladesh. Grassroots association officers, volunteers (some with stipends from the NGO) and NGO frontline staff work together. Officers and volunteers give unpaid project implementation support of various kinds and in return are given influence in beneficiary selection.
**CLCs and documentation**

These boundary systems extend to written communication. Association documents are often formatted, edited, archived and re-exhibited by the NGO workers as seasonal and project cycles demand. The help of better educated community members is similarly harnessed as need be. Documents may be kept in some officer's household, some even after the individual exits. Visitors to any selection of CLCs would likely meet similar mixes of Participatory Rural Appraisal-inspired poster-size charts and tables, in various states of usage and currency. The hand-drawn village map is one of the earliest made in the collaboration. It is the dwelling numbers that the volunteers inscribed on such maps that provide the only viable identifiers by which FIVDB monitors can relate household-level datasets to each other.

Yet there is an important distinction in the documentations that the CLCs have built up. There is a type of CLC-produced document that we are not likely to find in the venues of other grassroots associations. In addition to the mini-libraries that FIVDB supplied for post-literacy readers, individual CLCs decorate their meeting places with wall magazine contributions from their members. These capture moments of creativity and the courage of self-expression, particularly in low-status women. The sessions in which the women make their contribution sometimes benefit from the protective presence of both female volunteers and FIVDB advocacy workers. The photo shows one such support team in front of wall magazines.
Dungria village, Sunamganj District, February 2013.

In a sample of 52 CLCs visited by monitors in 2013, wall magazines were on display in 46 libraries (Chowdhury, Bhattacharjee et al. 2013: 7). Their variability, in style and substance, has not been studied. It will be interesting to follow how much of that keeps coming forth after Jonoshilon.

A budgeting simulation

With 33 CLCs, FIVDB conducted, in late 2012, a simulated budgeting exercise. The type of exercise was chosen in the wider context of participatory budgeting, which has attracted growing attention within the realm of governance support (Baiocchi 2005; Cotterill and Richardson 2010), including some in Bangladesh (Rahman 2005). The predicate "participatory" in our case is ambiguous; the CLCs were invited to take part in a simulated budgeting exercise without real decision consequences. Some criticized this. Budget simulations nevertheless have their place in democratic deliberation (O’Looney 2006).

Simulation set-up

In this exercise, FIVDB monitoring associates encouraged CLC audiences to nominate community development projects. These could include adult literacy training, but the
facilitators of the exercise did not prompt for them. In a first round, proposals for CLC-led projects were invited and listed. A fictitious budget of Tk. 100,000, expressed in twenty Tk. 5,000 paper slips, was then distributed over the projects. In a second round, the audience would designate their first three priorities among the listed projects. The CLCs gave reasons for most of their priority project choices; these reasons too were recorded. The deliberations, in which CLC executive committee as well as ordinary members, and some non-members, participated usually took between 45 and 90 minutes.

For a flavor of how preferences were expressed with regards to adult literacy, these examples may suffice. A CLC audience in Brahmanbaria, including literacy training as well as a high school in their priorities, argued that

"Mothers introduce their children with letters and language. They always play a vital role for their children at the first and opening stage of their education. Also they perform family duties [that require some literacy] everyday such as taking their children to the hospital, administering medication. Further they need to learn some simple calculation according to household needs. That is why functional literacy is important"

while the justification to get their own high school was primarily the distance of the existing one. A CLC audience in Habiganj, in a village that had hosted classes previously, felt that the literacy rate was still extremely low, and that training for adults was needed to improve family health. Yet another CLC in the same district, equally concerned about the lack of education, pressed for more livelihood training. It did not make the connection with either literacy training or new education projects. Finally, a CLC in Sunamganj felt that many of its poor members could not sign their names. Thumb impression was a shame that afflicted not only these individuals, but the CLC as a village organization.

Although the exercise shed light on CLCs' preferences for improvements is several sectors, our interest here is in adult literacy. Only eight of the 33 CLCs gave any priority to adult literacy training. Another twelve did mention literacy, but did not consider training a priority. The remaining thirteen did not even mention it until asked about it later (i.e., about their reasons why they had not mentioned it).

**How to compare**

The fictitious budget allocations must not be taken at face value. Many among the CLCs who did list adult literacy training assigned the minimal amount of Tk. 5,000. They did so on the grounds that literacy projects were cheaper than infrastructural ones. Meaningful comparisons are therefore limited to relative allocations - relative to multiples of the average project costs in particular sectors. We use this device to initially compare the relative importance, in the eyes of CLCs, of adult literacy training vs. formal education of youth. These two sectors compete for budgets with six other sectors into which we categorized the proposed projects (see further below). Moreover, since the 1990s, the debate has in part been over whether investments in children's education yielded higher value than continued support for adult literacy training.
We find stark contrasts among districts. The interpretation has to be tempered by the fact that in several districts only three CLCs each took part in the exercise. At the extremes, the two districts of Netrakona and Brahmanbaria, with above-average importance given to both types of education, are very different from Sylhet, in which infrastructure and other projects have crowded out education in this exercise.

**Sectoral priorities**

We are therefore obliged to look into the competitive pattern across all sectors. Principal components, adjusted for the special character of these data\(^{10}\), open a window on it. This chart projects the structure of project budgets, by sectors, on a two-dimensional plane. Each CLC is given a point with coordinates expressing, as closely as possible its budget choices.

We find that allocations for adult literacy training are most drastically opposed to those that CLCs set aside for formal education, mostly primary and high schools. CLCs who mentioned educational concerns at all tended in one or the other direction.

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\(^{10}\) Budget shares are compositional data. In order to estimate valid principal components, zero allocations had to be replaced with an arbitrary minimum value. We chose Taka 2,000 in such cases, excluded projects categorized as "Other", then proportionally adjusted all the concerned CLC’s sector allocations to sum to Tk. 100,000. We used the same software as mentioned in the previous footnote. The result was edited in a biplot (Wikipedia 2009).
**Adult literacy and health**

In the chart, the angle between the adult literacy and health care arrows is smaller than 90 degrees. It indicates that the budget competition between these two sectors is relatively mild. Outside the budget constraint, they would be positively correlated. This finding rhymes with the qualitative data from the early learner interviews. These suggested that health-related themes were among the best remembered literacy consequences, plausibly because individual learners found practical options in this realm. The CLCs, at the village level, seem to feel a similar congeniality between literacy and health.

**Figure 9: Sectoral priorities in the CLC budgets**

By contrast, the infrastructure arrow is short. This means it did not project strongly on these two dimensions, but varies chiefly along a less dominant dimension.

This representation has some validity in the fact that the priority judgments regarding adult literacy correlate somewhat with the budget allocations (the dark green dots tend to be on the left side, more than the others). Overall the agreement between the two measures - priority and budget - is modest. The CLCs may have wanted to hedge their bets during this relatively brief exercise; many may not have been able to rely on a previously elaborated preference order.

**Adult literacy - only a minority concern?**

Even when these limitations are taken into account, the budgeting outcomes strongly suggest that adult literacy training nowadays has priority for a minority of CLCs only. This finding weighs all the more heavily as these organizations were founded and nurtured around the very literacy theme and tradition dear to FIVDB. It has to be taken with more than one grain of salt, though. The importance attached to adult literacy varies
regionally, as we have seen. Also, the facilitators observed that middle-class and male participants tended to favor infrastructure projects whereas literacy training was proposed as a budget item more often by poorer and female speakers. This is not a negligible influence in our sample CLCs, with half of the executive committee members, and most of the presidents, being from middle-class and rich households.

**Biography and history**

Of the rich experience that thousands of FIVDB's literacy learners made in the last three and a half decades, a small fraction has transpired to this study. In interpreting it, we are obliged to commute between different units and levels of the literate world. Many of our findings overlap with, and make sense only in conjunction with, the educational history of Bangladesh and the history of FIVDB's literacy program, to which the two preceding chapters refer.

The individual learner herself is a fleeting entity, propelled into, and at the same time distracted from, the literacy stream by survival struggles, the desire to better her social situation, changes in marital and occupational status, as well as the ups and downs of physical energy, health and aging. In other words, the neo-literate persons are not constant resources for their families, communities and formal organizations. Rather, they are subject to growth, mobility, wear and tear, at times renewal, at others removal from the universes of written communication, calculation and progressive social stances that FIVDB has been promoting.

**The volatile learner**

We have noted that volatility at the confluence of the age effect with a period effect - the effect of expanding education. The two together explain in large part the frequent relapse into illiteracy among the early learners. We find a similar combination of effects in the recent learners - this time in a world of TV, mobile phones and more abundant written material. Their literacy ambitions are molded in the new media rather than in the traditional personal letter, in the trains of documents that overseas migrants must negotiate, in the relevance that English (or at least Banglish) commands in some institutional areas, in opportunities for active consumers.

**Modest ambitions**

This is not a maximalist program for everybody alike; in fact, among many of the current learners, ambitions remain modest. The ability to sign their names is the bottomline, and helping their school-going children may be the highest desire for literacy use in some. As always, there is a mutual dependency of the personal and societal perspectives. It was emphasized even by observers who did not call for more literacy training - CLC members, for example, who felt that progress in their village had hit a wall that they would overcome only once they were connected to the electric grid.

**The social awareness side**

The growth of formal education, TV consumption, mobile phones and, less completely, Internet access has redefined the landscape of adult literacy. This is true not only in the technical sense - SMSs demand different manipulations than letter-writing - but even
more so of what we consider the "social awareness" aspect of literacy training. Its historic impact has been fairly well known. The early learners and shebika emphasized how literacy led to mental and behavior changes in the areas of health and hygiene, water and sanitation. The literacy training also increased the demand for school education and the willingness to make sacrifices for the children in this respect. Conversely, the literacy trainings do not seem to have boosted the capacity of the poor for stronger organization, political mobilization and collective advocacy.

The current situation of "social awareness" in the literacy program is less clear, and perhaps this element of the training is no longer that important for today's learners, or even the younger FIVDB workers. The program leaders have known for several years that the test at the end of the eight-month course is a poor measure of social awareness. This has not been fixed, plausibly because it was of lesser priority than the operational issues that rapid expansion under the Jonoshilon project posed. The social awareness scores are significantly less responsive to additional attendance days in the training than those for reading, writing and calculation. This suggests that the participants learn less, or learn it less efficiently, beyond what they already know and appreciate before the course. The staff offer alternative explanations for this, some of which we discussed earlier.

Greater diversity

But it would be misleading to wrong the program for the dearth of social awareness manifestations. Rural society has grown more diverse, and its members thus more individualized, despite the persistent group and family frameworks for much of social life in Bangladesh. Fifty years ago, two scholars of literacy (Goody and Watt 1963) had us believe that the combination of credit and literacy would spawn new organizations. Bangladesh nowadays has plenty of both ingredients - the almost universal microfinance coverage, and high primary education levels. The occupational structure certainly has been diversified, in non-farm work that employs more human capital. This implies the existence of organizational modifications, and of new knowledge and attitudes. The CLCs, of course, are new organizations formed around literacy activities, but their design and actual installation in 690 villages owe as much to FIVDB's direct intervention as to the learners' initiative. The CLCs themselves are meant to be places of social analysis.

It may well be that in comparison to the larger changes in society, the social awareness effects of an adult literacy programs, even as large as FIVDB's, pale. If so, the messages sent through its learners will have a complementary function, as personal empowerment in the participants and as reinforcement of those larger changes in their communities.

Chapter summary

This chapter traces learners' experience through a number of datasets assembled from different styles and sources. Qualitative interviews with 48 early learners and voluntary teachers painted a canvas of struggles for the freedom to learn in the 1980s and 90s when dominant elements of a largely illiterate rural society were opposing the format, if not the very idea, of adult literacy training. All of the interviewees evaluated their experience positively. But many have relapsed into a de-facto state of illiteracy. We explain this with the confluence of an age effect (the handing over of responsibility, including for literacy
tasks, to the next generation) and a period effect (expanded child education in the country).

**Learning together, but with different aims**

Already at that time, different motivations among learners were manifest. These have crystallized in different learner types, as an experiment with 266 recent learners showed. In the pattern of weights given to five dominant literacy uses, we found three motivational clusters: those who above all wish to shed the stigma of illiteracy by demonstrating their ability to sign their names (and also value the ability to make simple calculations); parents eager to help their children in the lower grades of primary school; those making better use of documents and mobile phone, presumably mostly for business purposes.

Our data are not strong enough to uncover many significant associations between preferred literacy uses and personal or community attributes. Rather, at this point, we want to briefly refer back to the graded uses of literacy that the Bangladesh Literacy Survey 2010 revealed (summarized in Table 4 on page 37). Here the uses of reading conformed to three tiers, those of writing to two tiers. In both skills, the higher levels were attained two to three times less frequently than the preceding ones. Compared to those steep gradients, the differences in ability across the three motivational types of FIVDB learners appear slightly less significant. This may be so because the baseline skills in the FIVDB target group are both lower and more uniform than in the Literacy Survey sample. Some of the document types used in the survey - "manuals", "bills and invoices", "charts and maps" - may be virtually absent in the lives of FIVDB's adult learners.

**Poverty no obstacle to good test results**

The test scores that FIVDB preserves of the end-of-training assessments provide another source of data to look into the structure of the learning experience, this time closely related to FIVDB's own definition of learner success. Again, we find a striking absence of clear effects on test scores of most personal attributes that one would suspect of generating differences. Notably, the poverty of the learner does not depress test scores significantly. This, as many other relationships, of course, may be due to uncontrolled selection effects. It might be, for example, that among the learners from rich and middle-class background there were more individuals who had dropped out of school for academic reasons, whereas drop-outs from poorer circumstance were compelled by financial ones. We did find, however, significant variation in test scores due to personal effort, prior schooling, and ambient literacy. Class-wise and district-wise differences were even substantially larger, but harder to explain.

**Public preferences**

To mitigate our fixation on learners, we sought to uncover preferences for adult literacy training in some accessible outsiders. To this end, monitoring associates conducted a simulation with 33 Community Learning Centers. CLC audiences were let to distribute a fictitious budget over various types of village improvements that the members present chose. The key outcome was that only a minority of the 33 considered adult literacy
training a priority. In their preference space, there is a clear opposition between training for adults and formal education for children, a dominance of infrastructure proposals over both of them, and an affinity between adult literacy and health care. This latter facet reconfirms the connection that already the early learners emphasized.

**Social analysis - where is it?**

We interpret the changing learner experience over time as the interplay of personal and societal effects. The society at large has affected FIVDB's immediate literacy environment in three waves. The expansion of formal education equipped many rural households with young members better educated than the (by now) elders who at one time were adult literacy learners. The diversification of the agricultural economy has in turn created greater diversity also in the pools of current and potential learners as well as in their motivations. The changing media landscape finally has set off a new dynamic between orality and writing, with additional demands for greater exposure to English. In this changing environment, the social awareness aspect of adult literacy training, which originally was one of its principal motivators, is in question. Social analysis may be less important for the learners; or it may have migrated elsewhere, such as to the CLCs.
Chapter 5: Future orientations

FIVDB has conducted adult literacy trainings for over thirty years. Contents and methods evolved over time. They were always updated in a common perspective. The perspective was provided by the social awareness pedagogy of Paulo Freire. In the process, Freire's intent of political mobilization was routinized into textbook-based, efficiently replicable delivery arrangements. They attempted to balance the technical skills needed to be a functionally literate person with substantive matter useful to the poor in rural Bangladesh.

In the meantime, the social environment of FIVDB's program changed almost beyond recognition. Society itself grew more literate, to the degree that vastly more children enrolled in school, and many more young adults had completed at least primary education. The new media of television and mobile phones (and also the significantly grown readership of newspapers and magazines) amplify the messages that contribute to social awareness. Plausibly, urban and international migration is another major formative force in social awareness. Compared to these powerful streams of news and narratives, literacy classes are hardly spearheading new social awareness anywhere.

"Reading the word, reading the world"

As a result, the current social environment does not support Freirean ambitions very well. The technical side of literacy training - "reading the word" - has largely migrated to the formal education system. On the side of social awareness - "reading the world" -, people are exposed to streams of communications more diverse, more frequent and more rapidly changing than what literacy classes might ever generate.

Yet, the ability to "read the world" remains problematic. There have been areas of patently heightened awareness. To give just one example: Water, sanitation and personal hygiene (including treatment of diarrhoea with the famous oral rehydration solution) have been saturated in mass education, and their basics are now widely shared (a change that many of the old learners and shebikas emphasized). The collective awareness of other social issues remains stunted. The poor and marginalized have acquired little in the way of deeper conceptual understanding of power structures and democratic practices. The mass media present politics chiefly in terms of party politics. Civil society may be enjoying a larger public presence, but it has not effectively widened the agenda of social issues.

It is working on them, though. Governance and reproductive rights exemplify areas in which considerable effort is being expended to create systems that the interested parties can promote and replicate. In these and other issue areas, the function of adult literacy training is to enhance the ability to "read the world". In more mundane terms, this means reinforcing the conceptual apparatus that members of local civil society need in order to meaningfully participate in issue-related debates and democratic opinion formation. The conceptual enrichment - how certain elements of one's "life world" are named, how they are connected - benefits private individuals and households as well. It benefits them in their entrepreneurial decision-making and in lifestyle risk assessment.
Freire, therefore, does not simply go away. The need to learn to "read the world" persists\textsuperscript{11}. Moreover, there are still considerable unmet needs in "reading the word", for elementary adult literacy training. This is particularly significant in regions with lagging school education (which is the situation by and large of Sylhet Division).

The world is infinite in its possibilities, yet any attempt to appropriate it - such as by "reading" it - remains circumscribed by time, energy and the flow of life itself. Therefore selections are needed. The rest of this chapter tries to offer some fairly abstract language helpful in making such selections.

**Greater diversity**

Adult literacy training will need to respond to greater individual needs as well as to collective risks. Society has become more diverse, more individualized, filled with more people with reading and writing abilities. Literacy training needs to help learners identify the chance to improve their individual conditions, and to seize it. It also needs to prepare them for common dangers that lurk, in changing combinations, in our modern risk society. For example, farmers may want to get used to more flexible crop calendars, for which literacy training can contribute new notions of scheduling and marketing. These farmers need to know also about terminator seeds. This is an issue that may be too specific for any literacy curriculum, but it is subsumable under more general risk classes of "cheating", "extreme behavior", or "preserving the environment".

In other words, the curriculum needs to help build relatively abstract and broad concepts with examples that are meaningful in practical life. Yet these concepts need to be such that can be generalized to a level that benefits learners with diverse backgrounds and interests, and in numerous future situations.

**Content and delivery**

Another axis along which adult literacy training has to be re-conceptualized concerns the interplay among the various levels from personal interaction through formal organization to the nation state\textsuperscript{12}. We explored this on the margins of our visit to a literacy class (see "Afterthoughts" on page 64). In terms of programming, this challenges us to re-define the links among: 1. delivery, 2. mediation, 3. content.

Delivery used to happen chiefly in classes for which twenty learners would meet for two hours, led by a volunteer teacher. FIVDB had trained the volunteer, paid her honorarium and had produced the primers and other instructional material. As such, FIVDB was the sole mediator, until in recent years a substantial role was accorded to the local CLCs. Similarly, content was most of it FIVDB's, plus some created by post-literacy participants.

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\textsuperscript{11} Surprisingly, in negotiations with the organizations commissioning a financial literacy module, FIVDB was told that it was selected in the bid also because of its credible competency in Freirean pedagogy.

\textsuperscript{12} More abstractly, one would formulate this third level as "mutual reachability", chiefly through common language, a notion that comes close to shared culture. Bangladesh is culturally so homogenous that we do not need to go into these subtleties.
These relationships may need to become more flexible. Content creation can be separated from FIVDB's mediation and delivery formats. To an extent, this is already happening, with FIVDB creating materials for other agencies that it may never utilize in its own field. Separate content creation will permit more rapid adaptation to changes in the ambient society. It may also come with its own order of integration problems. If the new content is never tested in FIVDB's own field, which elements can be recycled? Which can be recombined for other purposes (Polsani 2006)? In different contexts, will they be understood as intended?

The role of the CLCs as literacy mediators needs more thought and more practical trial and error. Instead of organizing only the slow eight-month courses, CLCs may host a greater diversity of shorter, more specifically themed literacy events. One can think of a variety of modular short courses, some taught by specialized instructors from outside. FIVDB will have to take precautions against CLC executive committee elites monopolizing the financially attractive subject-matter while relegating poorer members to trainings that will not throw up pecuniary dividends. Conversely, particularly gifted persons from the ranks of the CLCs may be propelled into larger roles, for tasks and positions that shift the boundaries between volunteers and employees.

*Don't throw away the traditional class..*

The adult literacy class, as it has existed in Bangladesh since the 1970s, had many fine traits to recommend it. Notably, it provided a sheltered environment for women and the poor to learn and debate in ways that village society otherwise scarcely offered. It is not by accident that many old participants prize the friendships formed in their classes. With every learner in class having her own copy of the primers, the method was socially inclusive (this cannot be presumed for computer or mobile phone-supported instruction!). Moreover, the local logistics was extremely cheap.

Complementing the traditional class with other forms of instructional interaction may be a necessity, in order to tap into wider realms of resources. But the effective learning value, social inclusiveness and cost of these new forms will have to be demonstrated.

*An organizing formula*

The Freirean approach drew strength from its compelling organizing formula: *See the world when you see the word*, with its close combination in literacy classes of symbol acquisition and social analysis. What can productively replace that powerful formula? One can, of course, devise a slogan like "individual opportunity and collective danger", but it is doubtful that this would direct future program development creatively. Its implications may not be palatable to some; if this formula were taken literally, not a single poem, none of the beautiful popular songs would ever be heard in literacy class.

Of late, the concept of "lifelong learning" has acquired greater currency among FIVDB adult literacy and social organization workers. And not by accident: as a concept, "lifelong learning" is enjoying strong global momentum (a Google search returns some 6.7 million references). Locally, the CLCs are seen as places and actors arranging diverse opportunities for learning across the life course. Who would not agree that the poor
deserve to be supported in their efforts to learn, at any point in their lives, as much as the rich already plugged into a wealth of learning resources?

The problem with "lifelong learning" is that it is a concept that at the same time holds too much and too little. It is almost tautological to say that people learn during all their lives; else they would not survive in changing environments. It is also known that most of that learning takes place informally, in families and communities (Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007). But this does not mean that we understand the specific ways in which very poor and marginalized persons learn (von Kotze 2009), and how their style of learning could be supported beyond the already familiar type of literacy classes. "FIVDB supports the lifelong learning efforts of the poor" is a noble intent; on funding applications, "lifelong learning" will look appealing. But it does not sufficiently discriminate between what should be selected for organized learning, and what not.

**Literacy as a collection of keys**

We need a formula with stronger discrimination, one that would, by implication, guide also the provision of lifelong learning support. For this we propose the idea that literacy is "a collection of keys that open doors to the world".

The formula combines images of a key that opens a door, of an open door that lets the learner enter the world, of literacy that provides many such keys. In part, they are inspired by the popular perception of literacy itself, in part by the modern concept of regulated access through digital keys:

- We remember, from many interviews, the power that the learners felt when they were able for the first time to sign a document. In Bangla, the words for literate (সাক্ষর, shakkhor) and signature (সাক্ষর, shakkhor) are identical but for a silent subscript.
- The rich have credit cards. They have passwords. The poor sign papers. Yet, there can be more than one "signature", as one can use more than one password. For example, one can sign for a loan so that it gets disbursed; later he can check the passbook and delay paying the installment if the loan balance was recorded incorrectly.
- In Bangladesh, in line with basic processes of societal modernization, access to institutional areas has grown more general. Everyone, for example, can visit a health center. Every specific instance of attempted access is then resolved according to the momentary balance of power (Hossain 2009). Literacy provides better keys to evaluate, if not to immediately gain, access.

For the design of adult literacy training, the images of doors and keys have the advantage of forcing hard thinking:

- To which parts of the world do the learners need access?
- Where is the locked door that keeps them out?
- Are there any keys that will open that door? Does literacy have any?
- How does the key have to be cut precisely?
Some may want to express this idea in more technical lingo. We can identify the specific "communicative competencies" and "analytic abilities" that the literacy training is to confer. This will be necessary in actual program designs. Here the imagery of opening doors is enough; it is part of our common language. We speak of "opening doors of opportunity". Designing literacy programs first of all means finding the doors, than making the keys. Some doors are locked; others are unlocked, or ajar, or wide open. The learning and practicing of literacy is a never ending effort to try out the keys to some of the locked doors. The keys may not immediately fit; they will have to be altered, in analogy to hacking computer passwords, by trying again and again.

The idea of "literacy as a collection of keys" may strike some as overly technical (digital keys), kowtowing to a capitalist icon (the credit card) and certainly falling short of Freire's vision. Freire, after all, wanted to open the whole world for the oppressed, not a set of minor opportunities enumerated in some curriculum. The world, it turns out, is a moving horizon - it ever keeps moving away from us as we move towards it. Doors resist, and keys fit or fail. By opening doors with the keys of literacy, FIVDB changes the world at least a little bit.
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