

Enhancing Pro-Poor Governance in West Bengal and Bihar

DFID-Funded Action-Research Project

CNTR 00 1533

Final Report (West Bengal)

René Véron
Glyn Williams
Dibyendu Sarkar
Manoj Srivastava
Stuart Corbridge

Keele University

in collaboration with

**State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development,
Government of West Bengal**

March 2001

Contents

ABBREVIATIONS.....	I
GLOSSARY.....	I
PREFACE.....	II
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	III
1 OVERVIEW	1
1.1 BACKGROUND	1
1.2 AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED OUTPUTS.....	1
1.3 MAIN PROJECT EVENTS	2
1.4 STRUCTURE OF REPORT	3
2 ACTIVITIES	4
2.1 STATE-LEVEL INCEPTION SEMINAR/WORKSHOP	4
2.2 VILLAGE MEETINGS	5
2.2.1 Malda	5
2.2.2 Midnapore.....	6
2.3 INTERMEDIARY STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS.....	7
2.3.1 Consultative Meeting with Panchayat Members	7
2.3.2 Consultative Meeting with Government Officers	9
2.3.3 Consultative Meeting with NGOs and with Representatives of Political Parties	10
2.4 DISTRICT-LEVEL INTER-STAKEHOLDER MEETING.....	11
2.5 CONCLUDING STATE-LEVEL SEMINAR	12
2.6 OTHER ACTIVITIES	14
2.6.1 Additional Individual Meetings.....	14
2.6.2 Press Conferences.....	14
3 OUTCOMES OF THE ACTION RESEARCH.....	15
3.1 DISSEMINATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE ESRC RESEARCH.....	15
3.1.1 The Dissemination Process.....	15
3.1.2 Verification and Validation.....	16
3.1.3 Additional Insights.....	17
3.2 AWARENESS-RAISING AMONG THE POOR	17
3.2.1 Methods of Awareness-Raising.....	17
3.2.2 Retention of Messages.....	19
3.2.3 Wider Consequences.....	20
3.3 ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN THE REFORM PROCESS	21
4 RECOMMENDATIONS	25
4.1 MALDA STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS	25
4.1.1 Improving Accountability through Strengthened Gram Sansads	25
4.1.2 Improving Accountability through Officials	26
4.1.3 Improving Accountability through Political Parties	27
4.1.4 Improving Practices of Pro-Poor Governance	27
4.1.5 Involvement of Wider Groups of Stakeholders.....	28
4.2 REACTIONS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF PANCHAYATS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT	29
4.3 WIDER ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS	30
4.3.1 Panchayati Raj: From Participatory Delivery to Pro-Poor Empowerment	31
4.3.2 Re-thinking Governance: Wider Issues.....	34
5 SUSTAINABILITY, REPLICATION AND FURTHER ACTION	41
5.1 PARTNERSHIP.....	41
5.2 REPLICATION.....	41
5.2.1 Replication of Original Research.....	41
5.2.2 Replication of Action Research.....	42
5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR SIPRD AND ACTION POINTS	42
5.3.1 Dissemination of Information to the Grassroots	42
5.3.2 Training of Functionaries	43
5.4 SUSTAINABILITY	45

Abbreviations

AEO	Additional Executive Officer
BDO	Block Development Officer
CCA	Convergent Community Action
CPM	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DFID	Department for International Development, UK Government
DM	District Magistrate
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
DPRD	Department of Panchayats and Rural Development
EOP	Extension Officer Panchayats
EPPG	<i>Enhancing Pro-Poor Governance</i> project
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council, UK Government
GoWB	Government of West Bengal
GP	<i>gram panchayat</i>
GS	<i>gram sansad</i>
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
INC	Indian National Congress
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PRI	<i>panchayati raj</i> institutions
PS	<i>panchayat samiti</i>
SC	Scheduled Castes
SIPRD	State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development
SSK	Shishu Shiksha Kendra (child education centres)
ST	Scheduled Tribes
TMC	Trinamool Congress
WB	West Bengal
ZP	<i>zilla parishad</i>

Glossary

<i>baithak</i>	meeting (informal)
<i>gram panchayat</i>	village council, lowest tier of the <i>panchayat</i> system
<i>gram sansad</i>	statutory village meeting; smallest <i>panchayat</i> constituency
<i>panchayat</i>	council, official institution of local government
<i>panchayat samiti</i>	block council, intermediary tier of the <i>panchayat</i> system
<i>panchayati raj</i>	official system of local self-government
<i>para</i>	neighbourhood
<i>pradhan</i>	president of the <i>gram panchayat</i>
<i>sabhadhipati</i>	president of the <i>zilla parishad</i>
<i>sabhapati</i>	president of the <i>panchayat samiti</i>
<i>upa-pradhan</i>	vice-president of the <i>gram panchayat</i>
<i>zilla parishad</i>	district council, highest tier of the <i>panchayat</i> system

Preface

Enhancing Pro-Poor Governance in West Bengal and Bihar (EPPG) is a DFID-funded action-research project (Contract Number CNTR 00 1533) working in parallel in selected districts of West Bengal and Bihar. This report covers the project's activities in West Bengal: the final report on the Bihar activities will be completed in July 2001. DFID does not necessarily share the views expressed in this report.

This action-research project emerged from a desire to disseminate the results of a major academic research project, *Rural Poverty, the Developmental State and Spaces of Empowerment in Bihar and West Bengal*, to a non-academic audience. That academic research project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom government (Award Number R000237761) and ran from 1 September 1998 to 31 October 2000. The ESRC research conducted detailed qualitative and quantitative study of poor people's interactions with the state, and its findings are of great potential interest to policy makers, development practitioners and activists, and the rural poor themselves. It is this potential that the EPPG project aims to develop.

The academic research was conducted by a core research team comprising of:

Prof. Stuart Corbridge	University of Cambridge (now at University of Miami [US], and London School of Economics)
Dr. Glyn Williams	Keele University
Sri Manoj Srivastava	(IAS on leave), University of Cambridge
Dr. René Véron	Keele University (now at London School of Economics)

For the West Bengal part of the EPPG project, we had the strong support of the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal, and we would particularly like to thank the Minister-in-Charge, Dr. Surjya Kanta Mishra, for his engagement with this work. Our core research team worked in West Bengal in collaboration with the State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development (SIPRD). Dibyendu Sarkar (then Deputy Director, SIPRD) joined the project team for this collaboration, and we thank the Director, SIPRD, Sri Alok Mukhopadhyay for facilitating these arrangements and for his guidance.

We would especially like to thank Somen Dhar who was fully engaged in the EPPG project for his invaluable contributions, as well as his meticulous logistical planning. Many thanks to Piyalee Dash Sharma for her administrative support and for giving the project office a human touch. We would also like to acknowledge the help and assistance of our part-time field staff that included Khushi Das Gupta, Kali Ranjan Saha, Md. Basar Ali, Dr. Ashim Mukhopadhyay, Tapan Kumar Pramanick, Sunrita Bhattacharyya, and the workers of the Rajadighi Community Health Service Society (RCHSS).

Last but not least, we would like to thank all the participants in the action research, especially the villagers of Jhajra and Rampura, the stakeholders in Malda and the state-level officials and academics, for their invaluable contributions. We hope that this report represents these contributions, and reflects the widespread support for improving pro-poor governance we found expressed during the project.

Glyn Williams
Project Director

Executive Summary

The action-research project *Enhancing Pro-Poor Governance in West Bengal and Bihar* (EPPG) evolved from the research project *Rural Poverty, the Developmental State and Spaces of Empowerment in Bihar and West Bengal*. In West Bengal, EPPG was carried out jointly by the original research team and the State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development (SIPRD) from October 2000 to February 2001. The project had the **purpose** of enabling developmental actors to reflect critically on current difficulties and successes of local government, and to use these reflections to inform policy making and forms of social action that have an impact on poverty reduction. EPPG had the **objectives** to represent the problems of the poor at higher levels; to raise consciousness among the poor participants; to engage stakeholders in a pro-poor reform process; to develop recommendations for enhancing pro-poor governance; and to enable the replication of the action research.

EPPG focused on Malda district where local governance has had some difficulties that can point to general weaknesses of the system of local governance in West Bengal. The **project approach**, fine-tuned in the inception seminar/workshop with state-level officials and academics, was to engage user groups in a **series of integrated meetings and learning events**, starting with the village and ending at the state level (Chapter 2). The **village meetings** in Malda and Midnapore, attended by 200 and 150 villagers, respectively, including marginalised groups such as women and tribals, disseminated crucial information on people's rights, the system of local self-government, and development programmes. The three **intermediary stakeholder meetings** in Malda involved 137 persons among the groups of local councillors, government officers, NGOs and political parties from the village, block and district levels. The groups reflected on problems of local governance and came up with possible solutions. These recommendations were further developed in the **inter-stakeholder meeting** in Malda where the various stakeholder groups also had the opportunity to interact with each other. The **concluding state-level seminar** presented findings of the action research to a relevant audience of state-level officers and academics, and pointed to possible implications for training, dissemination and research. The participants also discussed the Malda stakeholder recommendations and wider issues related to participatory, pro-poor governance in West Bengal. Other activities included **press conferences** in Malda and Calcutta as well as individual interviews in Malda.

EPPG produced **direct outcomes** in regard to the dissemination and discussion of research findings; awareness-raising among the poor; and engaging intermediary stakeholders in the reform process (Chapter 3). The action research **disseminated and discussed the research findings** at various levels. This provided an opportunity for the poor participants to look at their local socio-political conditions from a new perspective, and for block, district and state-level participants to reflect on rural poverty, awareness, participation, accountability and empowerment. Furthermore, the **action research confirmed the research findings** on processes of (dis-) empowerment and local governance in Malda.

The **awareness-raising** campaign at the village level used a multitude of dissemination methods, including participatory learning, distribution of handbills and creation of "village libraries". The fairly high retention of messages between 42% and 88% one month after the village meetings depended not so much on the dissemination

method but rather on the immediate practical relevance of the messages for poor people's livelihoods. For the better retention, more continuous efforts that are integrated in the institution of the statutory village-level meeting should be considered. Villagers preferred the participatory learning methods to conventional presentations, but the action research pointed to the **need for well-trained, skilful facilitators** if participatory learning methods are to become more effective. Furthermore, almost half of the poor participants consulted the written materials; illiterate persons often sought the assistance of literate relatives or neighbours. This points to a **high potential for using written material** for the dissemination of information if this is accompanied with verbal information. The awareness-raising campaigns had even **wider consequences**. Particularly in Malda, the dissemination of basic information on people's rights seemed to have influenced collective action against various types of malpractice, and for reviving a women's savings group. However, the sustainability of collective action will depend on its tangible outcomes and on the responsiveness of the local bureaucracy and the local councils.

EPPG **engaged intermediary stakeholders in the reform process** focusing on current issues and problems for pro-poor governance, such as awareness and information flow, processes of accountability, and co-ordination between the stakeholders groups. These meetings in Malda produced 37 recommendations for changing local government policy and practice, and thus indicate the **enthusiasm of government officers, local councillors and NGOs** to engage with a process of reform that includes strengthening their own accountability and improving co-ordination between each other. It proved **more difficult to actively engage political party representatives** within this process. Yet changing the attitudes and practices of this group provides the greatest single opportunity for improving pro-poor governance. More generally, the action research pointed to the need to assess the strengths and weaknesses, as well as possible incentives and limitations, for each stakeholder group in contributing to the reform process. Furthermore, the EPPG project recognised that this type of user engagement in relatively big gatherings is very time-consuming. Future projects may therefore consider holding preparatory meetings and core sessions with key representatives.

EPPG generated a number of **recommendations** both directly from the stakeholder groups and from reflections within the project team (Chapter 4). It is remarkable that many **recommendations from stakeholders** in Malda refer to non-implementation of an existing act or government directive. Detailed recommendations were made on strengthening accountability through the statutory village meetings, bureaucratic checks and corrective action by political parties; and on improving governance through better co-ordination within the institutions of local self-government and the involvement of wider groups of stakeholders, including NGOs. The **Department of Panchayats and Rural Development responded very positively** to the stakeholder recommendations, and expressed the intention to review these suggestions and introduce changes where necessary and practicable.

Our **wider recommendations** relate to a more radical rethink of governance in West Bengal **moving the local councils beyond their role as implementing agencies** of externally directed schemes to an institution of empowerment and innovation. Such a rethink would include a greater role for the local councils' own resource mobilisation and the provision of untied funds. Furthermore, a supportive political culture should strengthen the authority of elected members. More generally, increased emphasis is to be given on **building human capabilities** and bringing education and health under

effective pro-poor control. EPPG identified a great potential in the many committed bureaucrats. This potential may unfold through more **systematic institutional learning and improved incentive structures**. Finally, EPPG recognises that bureaucratic attempts to improve pro-poor governance will only provide partial solutions unless political parties and leaders are directly and actively involved in the reform process.

The genuine **partnership** between the original research team and SIPRD improved both effectiveness and **sustainability** of the action research (Chapter 5). SIPRD has drawn important lessons, and considers the **replication** of both the original research and the action research. Encouraged by insights from the EPPG project, SIPRD also contemplates to change elements of their **training programme** in order to meet the needs of participatory rural development better.

We hope that this action research will be useful in assisting the Government of West Bengal's own efforts of enhancing participatory development and pro-poor governance.

1 Overview

1.1 Background

The **action-research project** *Enhancing Pro-Poor Governance in West Bengal and Bihar* (EPPG) started in October 2000. Project activities concluded in January 2001. The project aimed to disseminate and discuss findings from the previous two-year **ESRC¹ research project** *Rural Poverty, the Developmental State and Spaces of Empowerment in Bihar and West Bengal*. The academic research investigated the links between governance, state-led development and empowerment in two districts of West Bengal (Malda and Midnapore) and three in erstwhile Bihar (Vaishali, Bhojpur and Ranchi).

The West Bengal part of the research identified **widespread poverty and pressing difficulties in the organisation of local governance, particularly in Malda district**. The district suffers from weak public accountability of *panchayat* institutions, lack of transparency and information to the grassroots, reliance on patronage-based systems of politics and a relatively weak civil society/undeveloped social capital. These factors combine to hamper poverty-alleviation programmes undertaken by both the state bureaucracy and NGOs. In West Bengal, the EPPG action-research project therefore has focused on Malda district rather than Midnapore district.

1.2 Aims, Objectives and Expected Outputs

The **purpose of the action-research** was to use research findings to enable developmental actors to reflect critically on current difficulties and successes of local government, and to use these reflections to inform policy making and forms of social action that have an impact on poverty reduction. In particular, the objectives were as follows (extracted from project proposal):

- To **discuss, confirm, further analyse, and reflect** on, problems identified in the ESRC research and to represent the problems of the poor at higher levels
- To **raise consciousness among the poor participants** in the research areas and to enable them to make greater and more coherent demands upon the state
- To **engage stakeholders** (*panchayat* functionaries, government officers, NGOs and political parties) in a pro-poor reform process that addresses their accountability and co-ordination with other stakeholder groups
- To develop “from below” **suggestions and recommendations** for improving pro-poor policy and practice of local governance
- To draw lessons relevant for possible **replication** of action research and develop linkages with partner institutions for better **sustainability**

¹ Economic and Social Research Council, UK Government.

The **expected outputs** as formulated in the proposal were as follows:

- The **strengthening of the ‘voice’ of the poor** through reflective, critical and constructive dialogue between the rural poor, civil society actors and state personnel (including political executives).
- The **development of linkages with partner organisations** that will ensure that the benefits from the meetings and events can be sustained and replicated across both States.
- The **dissemination of policy-relevant findings** to the Government of West Bengal and the Government of Bihar, DFID India, and others in a position to enhance government accountability in relation to poverty alleviation.
- The **development of new methods of disseminating** and using academic findings for action research.

1.3 Main Project Events

The preceding academic research applied qualitative and quantitative methods at various scales of governance, from the village up to the state level. The action research tried to replicate this principle by moving between different spatial scales. For this purpose, **a series of integrated meetings and learning events** with poor villagers, *panchayat* members, government officers, NGOs and political parties was organised. Figure 1 presents an overview of the main meetings in their chronological sequence.

The meetings comprised of two aspects: the dissemination of information, including information on people’s rights, their situation and the research findings; and the creation of recommendations from below through the series of stakeholder meetings described above.

The action-research in West Bengal **deliberately focused on Malda district** that has particular difficulties of local governance. Malda was selected because it can make visible real and potential weaknesses of the *panchayat* system in West Bengal. The intention was to learn from the problems of this district – rather than to criticise Malda district or its people – and so come up with constructive criticism and practical recommendations.

Figure 1: Timetable of Main Project Activities

Date	Event	Venue
7/11/2000	State-Level Inception Seminar/Workshop	State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development, Kalyani
12/11/2000	Village Meeting Malda	Jhajra village, Old Malda block, Malda district
14/11/2000	Village Meeting Midnapore	Rampura village, Debra block, Midnapore district
06/12/2000	Intermediate Consultative Meeting with <i>Panchayat</i> Members	<i>Zilla Parishad</i> Guesthouse, Malda town
07/12/2000	Intermediate Consultative Meeting with Government Officers	District Collectorate, Malda town
08/12/2000	District-Level Press Conference	District Collectorate, Malda town
09/12/2000	Intermediate Consultative Meeting with NGOs and Political Parties	<i>Zilla Parishad</i> Guesthouse, Malda town
16/12/2000	District-Level Inter-Stakeholder Meeting	District Collectorate, Malda
06/01/2001	Concluding State-Level Seminar	Hotel Oberoi, Calcutta
06/01/2001	State-Level Press Briefing	Hotel Oberoi, Calcutta
March 2001	Final Report to GoWB and DFID	

1.4 Structure of Report

Chapter 2 describes the main **project activities** in more detail; i.e., in terms of attendance, objectives, activities and immediate outcomes. Chapter 3 discusses the **project outcomes** with reference to the project objectives, such as the dissemination of the ESRC research findings; awareness-raising among the poor; and the engagement of various stakeholders in a pro-poor reform process. This section also includes an appraisal of the applied methods and the process of the action research. Chapter 4 presents the **recommendations**. These include recommendations developed by the stakeholders in Malda; reactions from DPRD; and wider recommendations drafted by the action-research team. Chapter 5 relates to indirect outcomes of the action research that are crucial in terms of **project sustainability**. This section contains an assessment of the **partnership** developed between the original research team and SIPRD, and information on the **replication and further action points** considered by SIPRD.

2 Activities

2.1 State-Level Inception Seminar/Workshop

Participants

46 persons attended the state-level inception seminar/workshop at SIPRD in Kalyani. We invited state-level government officers from DPRD and the education sector, selected academicians and NGO representatives, selected government officers and *panchayat* members from the studied districts and blocks, and the SIPRD staff. Attendance was particularly strong from DPRD, SIPRD and the academic community. Both the Principal Secretary of DPRD and the Commissioner Land Reform (former Principal Secretary of DPRD) were among the participants.

Objectives

- Discuss the problems identified in the ESRC research and represent the problems of the poor
- Engage key stakeholders with the planning of the action-research project
- Fine-tune planned activities of subsequent meetings at the village and district levels

Activities

The morning session was organised as a seminar on the ESRC research. The **seminar presentation** was given in three parts: *Panchayats*, networks of power and access to the state; the Employment Assurance Scheme, people's awareness and roles of various stakeholders; and Primary Education and the need of outside support for effective community participation (see seminar paper in Appendix II). The floor discussion centred on methodological issues and the local-level power relations between the *panchayats* and political parties.

The afternoon session formed a **workshop on the planned activities** of the action research (village meetings, three intermediary stakeholder meetings, and inter-stakeholder meeting). The participants were split into five groups and discussed the draft logical frameworks of one of the planned events. Important suggestions were made on the logical framework of the village meetings. Furthermore, some participants cautioned that participatory methods may not be suitable for the stakeholder meetings beyond the village level, but they came up with only a few concrete suggestions. The plenary session debated the involvement of political parties in the action-research process at some length.

Immediate Outcomes

The good attendance and high levels of participation in discussions on the research findings and planned activities suggest that the inception seminar/workshop succeeded in engaging an audience relevant for policy formulation and implementation in the development of the action research project.

The well-attended seminar gave the action-research team the opportunity to **present** the problems identified in the ESRC research and the problems of the poor **to a wide and relevant audience**. The workshop engaged a relevant audience with the planning of the action research. Generally, the **planned activities were endorsed**. Particularly,

the plenary session also gave us the green light for working directly with representatives of political parties. Further fine-tuning and prioritisation of the activities at the various meetings was left to the action-research team.

2.2 Village Meetings

The EPPG team organised two village meetings in Malda and Midnapore, one in each of the two wards (*gram sansad* areas) that had been studied in detail in the ESRC project. The objectives of these meetings were to:

- Discuss, confirm, and reflect on, problems identified in the ESRC research
- Raise consciousness among the poor participants to enable them to make greater and more coherent demands upon the state

2.2.1 Malda

Participants

More than 200 people attended the village meeting in Jhajra. This is a remarkable figure considering that the ward has 330 households and that usually only 20-30 people attend the *gram sansad* meeting here. The invitation process focused on poor and destitute tribal communities and women. Their participation turned out to be fairly good. However, it was unavoidable that a fair number of middle-class persons participated too. In particular, it was impossible for the EPPG team to exclude 10-15 persons who were mobilised by local political strongmen and contractors.

Activities

After a short inaugural part that included folk songs sung by female participants, the EPPG team **presented the research findings**, and discussed these briefly with the participants. The presentation focused on lack of information and transparency, and on political patronage.

The villagers were split into four groups and were encouraged to draw the *panchayat* system from their own perspective (**participatory depiction of panchayat system**). The groups were too big and heterogeneous, and most of the facilitators from a local NGO were not experienced enough, to make this participatory learning method effective in both representing the view of the poor and inducing interactive learning.

An **interactive presentation** informed the participants about their rights and duties in regard to *panchayats* and about particular governmental development schemes. Important messages included information on the minimum-wage rate and the illegality of contractor involvement in *panchayat* works schemes. Awareness of development schemes and of the *panchayat* system, particularly of the tiers above the *gram panchayat*, was extremely low.

The presentation was followed by a **role-play on gram sansads** that confirmed that only a few are usually invited to these meetings, and that the discussions do not go beyond the listing of needs. The participants were made aware of their right to participate and of the role of these meeting to function as the place of the social audit of the *gram panchayat*.

Furthermore, four **handbills** informing on the *panchayat* system, development schemes, and government and people's responsibilities in regard to health and education were discussed and distributed to all participants. Female participants from each of the four villages were also given **books** on the *panchayat* system developed by SIPRD. In this way, the EPPG team intended to build up "village libraries" to which marginalised sections of society also have access.

The four-hour meeting ended with a meal prepared by the community itself.

Immediate Outcomes

The village meeting **discussed and confirmed the ESRC research findings**, particularly in regard to people's unawareness of government schemes and the *panchayat* system, the strategy of political strongmen to retain control over information (demonstrated by their attempts to dominate the meeting, especially the group work, and by the mobilisation of political loyalists itself), and thus the need for awareness-raising.

The EPPG team **disseminated crucial information** on people's rights and duties, and on the responsibilities of *panchayat* members and government staff to an unexpectedly wide audience. The participants listened very attentively to any information given to them. The interest of the participants did not come as a surprise to us, as the previous research indicated that information had been deliberately withheld from the villagers. The participants understood and retained the messages well (see Section 3.2 for an evaluation of the village meeting).

2.2.2 Midnapore

Participants

About **150 people** (out of 330 households) **attended** the meeting in spite of the beginning harvest season. The invitation process focused on poor households and a few key informants of our previous research. The EPPG team succeeded in including some destitute women who usually do not attend the generally well-attended *gram sansad* and other meetings.

Activities

After a brief inauguration by the *pradhan*, the EPPG team **presented the research findings** focusing on the relation between *panchayats* and political parties, including the often controlling – as opposed to assisting and monitoring – role of the ruling party (CPM).

The participants were divided into four relatively homogeneous groups in terms of gender, poverty and education level, and were asked to draw the *panchayat* system from their own view (**participatory depiction of *panchayat* system**). Particularly the two women groups, after some initial confusion and reluctance, engaged very actively and enthusiastically in this participatory learning exercise, and produced drawings that reflect their perception of local government – that is, the central role of three or four local CPM workers.

A **brainstorming on development schemes** attempted to lead to interactive learning. However, knowledge of the schemes was low so that the exercise took the shape of a conventional presentation. In particular, the participants were informed about the illegality of contractor involvement in *panchayat* works schemes, a rule they were previ-

ously unaware of. In a **role-play on the Village Education Committee** participants discussed the issue of teacher performance and the problems of convincing parents and children of the need to attend school very competently.

As in Malda, four **handbills** on the *panchayat* system, development schemes, and government and people's responsibilities in regard to health and education were discussed and distributed to all participants. Female participants from each of the three villages were given **books** on the *panchayats* for building up new "village libraries".

The 3½-hour meeting was concluded with a lunch prepared by members of the community.

The **debriefing session** among the facilitators developed into another very important action-research activity. Local party workers listened to our discussion and were involved in these. The frank discussions centred on the actual and desirable role of the CPM in this area and the importance of continued awareness-raising.

Immediate Outcomes

The village meeting **discussed and confirmed the ESRC research findings**, particularly in regard to the relation between the *panchayat* and the ruling party, and the importance of local party workers. Even in Midnapore, a fairly low level of people's awareness of particular development schemes was noticeable.

The EPPG team **disseminated information** on development schemes and the different responsibilities of the *panchayat* and political parties. In Midnapore, where access to information (through meetings and party workers) is generally unproblematic, the attention of the participants dropped after some time and was generally lower than in Malda. The retention of the messages is analysed in Section 3.2.

2.3 Intermediary Stakeholder Meetings

Three intermediary stakeholder meetings were conducted in Malda district with *panchayat* members, government officers, and representatives of NGOs and political parties. The objectives of these meetings were to:

- Discuss, confirm, further analyse, and reflect on, problems identified in the ESRC research;
- Represent the problems of the poor
- Engage the various stakeholders in a reform process that addresses their accountability and the co-ordination between stakeholder groups
- Start developing suggestions and recommendations for overcoming identified problems and improving pro-poor policy and practice of local governance

2.3.1 Consultative Meeting with Panchayat Members

Participants

The **attendance of 36 *panchayat* members** of all levels (13 *gram panchayat*, 19 *panchayat samiti* and four *zilla parishad*) was slightly below expectation. About 100 *panchayat* members were invited to this one-day meeting, including *sabhapatis* and

selected chairpersons of *panchayat samiti* standing committees from all blocks, and the *pradhans* and *upa-pradhans* from the studied *gram panchayat*.

Activities

In the **presentation of the research findings**, members of the EPPG team focused on the lack of awareness among poor people in Malda district. We stressed the point that lack of awareness is not a “natural” state but indicates a failure of various actors, including *panchayats*, political parties, bureaucracy and NGOs, to raise people’s awareness. Rather than elaborating on the failures of Malda, the presentation **stressed positive lessons** from Midnapore, where co-ordinated and synergistic effort of various actors helped awareness-raising and eventually development.

In the **discussion of the presentation**, the *Sabhadhipati* confirmed the research findings and elaborated on the need to raise people’s awareness and to focus on improving literacy. Other participants supported the analysis of the EPPG team, and confirmed that **lack of awareness is a general feature** of Malda district and not limited to the ward that had been studied in detail.

In **group discussions**, the participants discussed a **case study of gram sansad operation** highlighting problems of attendance, timing and agenda of discussion. The groups identified various problems and started to make **suggestions** for their solution. For example, it was noticed that calling the voters by microphone is not sufficient. In Gazole block, there have been positive experiences of distributing handbills and organising para baithaks (neighbourhood meetings) before the *gram sansad* meeting. The need for more flexibility in regard to determining the season and time of the day of the *gram sansad* was expressed.

Furthermore, the participants pointed to an important weakness of the *panchayat* system; i.e., the **poor connections between the *panchayat samiti* and the *gram panchayat***. The *panchayat samiti* is not made directly accountable to the voters in the *gram sansad*. There are no links between the *panchayat samiti* standing committees and the (mostly defunct) *gram panchayat* sub-committees. The participants called for stronger GP level sub-committees (at the expense of the power of the *pradhan*) and for GP level co-ordination committees with representation from the bureaucracy, other tiers of the *panchayat* and NGOs.

The meeting ended with a **plenary session** in which the group findings were summarised and discussed.

Immediate Outcomes

The meeting produced some relevant debates and **recommendations in regard to conducting gram sansads and strengthening the GP-PS relations**. Many bottlenecks were identified in local level implementation that do not require policy change. In most cases, these recommendations were not refined enough for putting them forward to the state level. In particular, existing legal provisions and reasons for their non-implementation at the *panchayat* level had not been explored sufficiently. Therefore, it was decided to further discuss and concretise the recommendations at the inter-stakeholder meeting.

2.3.2 Consultative Meeting with Government Officers

Participants

The attendance of this one-day meeting was excellent: **67 government officers and employees attended** (10 GP-level staff, 29 block-level officers plus eight BDOs, and 20 district-level officers) out of circa 100 invitees, including selected district-level officers, BDOs, Jt. BDOs and EOPs from all blocks, all block-level extension officers and *gram panchayat*-level officers from Old Malda Block.

Activities

The **presentation of the research findings** focused on the issue of accountability. It was stressed that there are three important strands to accountability: administrative accountability (bureaucratic system of monitoring), political accountability (supervision of *panchayat* members by political parties, etc.) and public accountability (e.g., social audit in *gram sansad* meeting, beneficiary committees). It was argued that political accountability and public accountability seem to be weak in Malda district.

There was **general agreement with our research findings** and confirmation that these are **valid for the whole Malda district**. One participant questioned the methodology of concentrating on one ward, but ironically agreed with all the findings of the ESRC project. Some argued that we should have focused on political favouritism rather than corruption in the form of leakage of development resources. (Both topics have received equal weight in the more detailed ESRC reports.) The **blame** for lack of awareness and transparency was generally **put on political leaders**. The BDOs expressed deep frustration because of negative political interference in their work. They would at times even face threats (including physical ones) when they try to do their job impartially or engage directly in awareness-raising activities.

In **group discussions**, the participants further elaborated on the research findings and started to come up with make concrete **suggestions** for overcoming the identified problems. The groups came up with a number of ideas, including the need for the bureaucracy to engage in “counter-propaganda” for awareness-raising, formation of GP-level co-ordination committees, tagging block-level officers to GPs, strengthening administrative accountability of elected *panchayat* members, need for more flexibility in centrally sponsored schemes, and redeployment of government officers.

The groups presented their findings in the plenary session.

Immediate Outcomes

The meeting produced a extensive list of **specific recommendations** for reforming pro-poor governance. Furthermore, **generic issues** arose from the discussion. For example, the call for new co-ordination committees raised the question why existing channels of information flow do not work in practice. The demand for strengthening the accountability of *panchayat* members raised questions why existing checks are not effective. These issues were taken to the inter-stakeholder meeting for further discussion.

2.3.3 Consultative Meeting with NGOs and with Representatives of Political Parties

Participants

This one-day meeting was very well attended by NGO representatives. Three persons from each of Malda's 14 NGOs were invited, and of these **29 NGO leaders and grassroots workers from 13 NGOs participated..** The attendance of political parties was very low. Only **three representatives of political parties** (all CPM) participated actively in the meeting, although invitations were given to all political parties, and CPM, INC and TMC representatives were invited from all blocks. However, the district committees and chairpersons of all parties failed to pass on the invitations to the blocks.

Activities

The **presentation of the research findings** was similar to the one given to the government officers. It also emphasised the (potential) role of NGOs in raising popular awareness of government schemes, as well as the (potential) role of political parties in raising awareness and supervising *panchayat* members.

In the subsequent **discussion of the findings**, NGO representatives agreed with the research team and argued that the lack of political will was responsible for the failure in awareness-raising in Malda district. In this rather tense session, the political leaders in turn accused NGOs of having hidden political agendas. A general appeal by a political leader to look at the positive role of parties for awareness-raising, was not supported with positive examples.

The **NGO** representatives were split into two groups and given the task to **assess their comparative advantages** vis-à-vis *panchayats* and political parties, the difficulties in making full use of these comparative advantages and ideas for collaborating with *panchayats* and the bureaucracy. The NGOs felt that they have an edge over others in raising awareness among the poor. The NGOs often **are not well informed about government schemes**, but potentially could play a more active role in making people aware of government schemes and legal rights. It was furthermore suggested that NGOs should be included in GP- and ward-level co-ordination committees. There was no agreement on the question of whether the *panchayats*, the administration or the NGOs should take the lead in bringing about better co-ordination. The issue of **NGO accountability** was also discussed. One NGO has started social audits by beneficiaries and lays their books open to the *panchayat samiti* and block administration. This led to more trust between the NGO, the bureaucracy and the *panchayats*. Other NGOs insisted that being "accountable to one's own commitment" would be sufficient.

The **CPM representatives** stressed the negative aspects of political competition – for example, the direct obstruction of development works by the political opposition. This was deemed to be due to political immaturity. Negative political competition also impedes awareness building amongst common people. The participants acknowledged the need for reconnecting with the people. Corruption due to vested interests (among all levels of all parties) was seen as a major problem. It was agreed that political parties have the power to correct this without policy changes. In general, however, despite these critical reflections on the current practices of political parties (including those of opposition parties), this group that included a former MLA and two members of a local CPM committee was much **less willing or able to come up with positive suggestions** for change than other stakeholders. They wanted to discuss the issues

raised and plan their response within internal party meetings, rather than in the more public setting of the project's stakeholder meetings.

Immediate Outcomes

The meeting resulted in a list of **suggestions from NGOs** for improving pro-poor governance, particularly the co-ordination between various stakeholder groups. These suggestions were taken to the inter-stakeholder meeting for further discussion. No suggestions were put forward by the present representatives of political parties.

This meeting brought together different stakeholder groups for the first time in the action research. However, the **dialogue between NGO representatives and political parties was not very constructive**. The NGOs blamed the political parties for lacking political will and having ulterior motives. The political parties accused the NGOs for having a hidden (party-)political agenda.

2.4 District-Level Inter-Stakeholder Meeting

Participants

62 persons attended this one-day meeting that concluded the activities at the district level. Participation **from the four stakeholder groups** was more or less equal: 22 *panchayat* members, 19 government officers, 11 NGO representatives and 10 representatives from political parties, five each from the CPM and the TMC, attended. The invitees consisted of selected persons from the previous intermediate stakeholder meetings and of selected additional invitees. Particular efforts were made to encourage politicians to participate. This resulted in a better participation of political parties, including the opposition, than in the previous meeting.

Objectives

- Develop “from below” suggestions and recommendations for improving pro-poor policy and practice of local governance
- Make intermediary stakeholders aware of the need for increased co-ordination and co-operation

Activities

After the inauguration by the Director of SIPRD and welcome address by the District Magistrate, the four stakeholder groups were given the task to **review, and elaborate on, their own suggestions** from the previous meetings. The action-research team had summarised and restructured the previous recommendations from the various stakeholder groups. The groups refined their previous recommendations. These related to (1) changes in policies and guidelines and (2) to changes in practice that do not necessarily require changed guidelines.

In regard to recommended **changes in policies**, the *panchayat* members expressed the need for clear guidelines in regard to the GP-level sub-committees and their links with the PS-level standing committees. The government officers suggested providing more information to *panchayat* members at the very beginning of their tenure (swearing in) in order to make their financial accountability and responsibility more explicit.

In regard to **changes in practice**, the *Sabhapati* of Gazole encouraged other *panchayat* member to take a more pro-active role for ensuring good attendance in *gram sansads* by organising *para baithaks* (neighbourhood meetings) holding monthly GP meetings, and by giving more responsibility to other GP members than the *pradhan*. NGOs suggested publishing information on government schemes and legal rights in an easily comprehensible manner so that it can be ensured that the “government [various officers] no longer speaks with different voices”. This written information should be distributed to NGOs that are then able to play a more effective role in awareness-raising.

The group discussions and evolved recommendations were presented to all stakeholders in the **plenary session** at the end of the meeting with the objective of initiating a discussion on possible co-ordination and co-operation between the various stakeholders.

Immediate Outcomes

The meeting produced a revised list of concrete suggestions. The EPPG team went through all the recommendations “from below”, summarised and presented them at the concluding state-level seminar where they were discussed by state-level officials and academicians (see Section 4.1).

2.5 Concluding State-Level Seminar

Participation

The seminar was **attended by 34 people**, mostly officers from DPRD and SIPRD as well as academics and representatives from the studied districts, mainly from Malda. The representation from other districts was disappointing. Only one *Sabhadhipati* (North 24-Parganas) was present, although all *Sabhadhipatis* and District Magistrates were invited.

Objectives

- Discuss, further analyse, and reflect on, findings from the ESRC project and the EPPG action research
- Share methodological lessons drawn from action research, and discuss replication of approach
- Review, and invite comments on, the suggestions and recommendations coming “from below” for improving pro-poor policy and practice of local governance

Activities

The morning session informed about the research and action-research activities, methodology and findings. The SIPRD liaison officer **presented the lessons** the Institute was able to draw from the collaboration. These included exposure to the ESRC-project methodology combining in-depth village-based studies with interviews at “higher” levels of governance; application of participatory-learning methods in the context of informing on people’s rights; gaining positive experience of working together on the ground with NGOs; and experimentation with handouts and creation of “village libraries” as extension tools. The presenter expressed the view that **SIPRD can, and will, replicate these activities** (see Chapter 5).

The **discussion on the process of action research** (approach and methodology), among many other issues, stressed the importance of facilitators in the case of participatory learning and dissemination. For example, skilled and well-trained facilitators are necessary to avoid domination of focus groups by a few. The Director of SIPRD added that the action research will have wider **implications on the training** at the Institute. In particular, the Institute intends to pay more attention to the GP level, as the research has shown that local people related to *gram panchayat* members rather than higher tiers of the *panchayat* system (see Chapter 5). Comments on the **research methodology** did not centre on inappropriateness of village studies as in the inception seminar, but questioned the possibility to make generalisations from Malda (and Midnapore). The EPPG with the support of other participants pointed out that the action research in Maldah was used as a **pointer to potential problems of the panchayat system** and not only generalised ones.

The **seminar presentation on Malda district** analysed generic problems in regard to awareness, information flow and accountability. Furthermore, it pointed to the potentials and blockages for reform that various stakeholders, including the bureaucracy, *panchayat* members, political parties and NGOs, have. Such an analysis was found necessary for making meaningful recommendations that do not replicate the failures of the existing practice and system. The action research identified the **hindrances to effective implementation of pro-poor policies** and guidelines in the dysfunctional political culture, the nature of the local political class and the lack of political will in Malda. Nevertheless, the action-research team identified (limited) **scope for improving practices** in stronger links between the politically weakly controlled *panchayat* member and the (often committed) block bureaucracy, and – to some extent – in the stronger involvement of NGOs in awareness-raising and lobbying on behalf of the poor in Malda. These findings were further developed into wider recommendations for enhancing pro-poor governance in West Bengal (see Section 4.3).

The **discussion of the (action-) research findings** centred on the nature of political leadership and political culture in Malda; (lack of) information flow to the grassroots and between the tiers of *panchayats* in spite of existing legal frameworks; and the difficulties of the intermediate bureaucracy, mainly BDOs, who face intimidation by political leaders and insufficient support from higher levels of the bureaucracy.

The afternoon session aimed to reflect on, and improve, the **recommendations from the stakeholders** in Malda. The participants made comments on, and additions to, specific recommendations from the stakeholders in Malda (see Section 4.1). More importantly, however, the **participants raised wider issues**, such as lacking incentives for the poor to participate under the present conditions where *panchayats* lack untied funds to address local priorities rather than implement government schemes. Poor performance was also explained with the absence of a merit-based incentive system for bureaucrats. This discussion motivated the action-research team to formulate a set of wider recommendations for enhancing pro-poor governance in West Bengal (see Section 4.3).

In the concluding session, **Prasad Roy, Principal Secretary of DPRD**, expressed satisfaction with the recommendations coming up from the action research (see Section 4.2). He commented on particular recommendations and assured that the department will take these seriously. He mentioned the open attitude of the government toward change, even when this requires modifications in the acts. The Principal Secretary also raised wider issues relating to the experimentation with Convergence

Community Action, including people's participation and the devolution of untied funds to the *panchayats*; the importance of political accountability and reform-minded political leaders; and the inclusion of the health and education sectors in the *panchayat* system. He concluded that the action research may have enabled the government to move a little bit faster in the direction of a participatory development approach that starts right from the outset with the priorities of the rural people.

2.6 Other Activities

2.6.1 Additional Individual Meetings

In addition to the planned events, the team decided to meet with a few informants individually in order to better understand the particular problems of Malda district. The team contacted CPM District Committee members, a *panchayat samiti* and a *gram panchayat* member from Gazole block. The meeting with the **CPM District Committee** was felt necessary because many comments in the intermediary stakeholder meetings pointed to the lack of political will from that source for raising awareness and curbing corruption. **Panchayat representatives in Gazole** were contacted because Gazole was presented as a positive exception of the general Malda scenario of local governance. The outcome of these interviews was reflected in the presentation of the concluding state-level seminar.

Furthermore, an NGO representative was asked for more information on the **NGO scene in Malda** in order to assess the scope of NGOs in awareness-raising. It was found that out of 14 local NGOs only a handful NGOs are involved in long-term grassroots work, and only one or two NGOs work on a clear conceptual basis. Most other NGOs are primarily engaged in short-term relief activities (see Appendix III). In Malda, therefore, **the scope of NGOs for substituting for the failing panchayat and political institutions in regard to awareness-raising is limited.**

2.6.2 Press Conferences

The one-hour press conference in Malda was **attended by 20 journalists** from state-level dailies (4), local weeklies (12), Press Trust of India (1), All India Radio (1) and ETV (2). The participants were briefed about the research and action-research projects and given the opportunity to ask questions. A press pack also included photographs of the previous village meetings. **Five articles** on the action research have been published in the Malda press, and the press conference was **covered in the ETV evening news** on 8 December and by the **All India Radio news bulleting** on 9 December. The articles were of different quality, some simply focusing on the curiosity aspect of foreigners doing research in Malda, others engaging with the issues raised in the (action) research at some depth (see selected press clippings in Appendix IV).

A **selected few journalists** with a background on writing about rural development in West Bengal were invited for the state-level press conference in Calcutta. Three renowned journalists from the Hindustan Times, the Telegraph and the Times of India attended this session. So far, **two articles** have been published in the Hindustan Times on issues of rural development and local governance on the basis of this extensive session (see selected press clippings in Appendix IV). The other two journalists intend to publish articles after the submission of this report.

3 Outcomes of the Action Research

This section on the project outcomes is structured in relation to the stated objectives, including dissemination and discussion of research findings; raising awareness among the poor in order to enable them to make more coherent demands upon the state; and engaging stakeholders in Malda in a pro-poor reform process that addresses their accountability and co-ordination with other stakeholder groups. Each of these sub-sections also makes reference to the project objective of drawing lessons for possible replication of action research. The outcome related to the other stated objectives – i.e., the development of recommendations from below, and the replication and sustainability of the project – are assessed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

3.1 Dissemination and Discussion of the ESRC Research

The process of user engagement in the dissemination of academic research is itself innovative. Section 3.1.1 describes the methods of dissemination and the choice of discussion topics, and how these were adjusted to the various audiences. Particularly at the district and state level, the dissemination of research findings was used to initiate policy-relevant discussions among the stakeholders. The meetings in Malda also confirmed and validated the research findings (see Section 3.1.2). Section 3.1.3 briefly describes the additional insights into issues of local governance gained during the action research.

3.1.1 The Dissemination Process

At the **village level**, research findings were disseminated in an interactive presentation style. The topics selected for dissemination were of ultimate relevance for the poor in the studied villages – i.e., lack of information and transparency in the Malda village, and the relation between *panchayats* and political parties in the Midnapore village. The dissemination of research findings had of course little scope of informing the villagers about something completely unknown to them. Yet it gave them an opportunity to **look at their difficulties and local socio-political conditions from a new perspective**.

The dissemination of research findings was **potentially sensitive**, as local political leaders were present at the village meetings. Therefore, the EPPG team spent more time disseminating general information on people's rights in regard to the *panchayats* and development schemes (see below) than discussing specific research findings. Still, the brief sharing of research findings proved our familiarity with the problems of two studied localities, and so **reinforced trust relations** with the poor. This served as an icebreaker for the meetings.

In the **intermediate stakeholder meetings** in Malda, the EPPG team focused on disseminating research findings on awareness and accountability. Rather than dwelling on Malda's problems, the presentations **emphasised positive lessons** from Midnapore for pedagogical reasons. Group discussions were organised to further reflect on the findings.

Unsurprisingly, the stakeholders – who have experience of working in Malda's government, *panchayats*, political and social organisations, and who regularly interact with poor villagers – were already aware of the problems addressed by the research

team. But their **existing knowledge** of rural poverty and local (dis-) empowering political processes **was reinforced** using hard data and case-study evidence from the studied villages and the comparison with Midnapore. At times, the stakeholders failed to internalise the nuances of our interpretations. For example, accountability was sometimes reduced to corruption. Lack of awareness was sometimes equated with lack of formal education rather than with social and political processes hindering information flow, as well as underdeveloped and insufficiently supported human capabilities.

However, disseminating research findings proved to be **very effective in establishing our credentials and in initiating policy-relevant discussions** among the various stakeholders in Malda. The reflection on the research findings led to policy recommendations from each stakeholder group, except the representatives of political parties. The nature of the recommendations from the stakeholders also shows that our analysis and interpretation was at least partly absorbed.

The dissemination of research findings was a major project outcome at the **state level**, both at the inception seminar and concluding seminar. The presentation of research findings at this level was the most **similar to academic dissemination**: seminar papers were presented and then discussed in plenary question-answer sessions. The seminar papers are also distributed with this report (see Appendix II).

3.1.2 Verification and Validation

At the state-level inception seminar, most participants accepted the findings of the ESRC research. Some civil servants mentioned in private that results are 100% correct, but due to their position they themselves would not be able to spell the problems out, particularly those relating to political interference.

However, **some academics expressed doubts concerning the methodology and validity** of the ESRC research. In particular, the “sample size” was criticised as too small for making generalised statements on the situation in West Bengal. It was wrongly understood that the ESRC research was nothing more than two village studies. This **criticism was rejected** on the ground that the research was not confined to the village level. Rather, it moved “up and down” spatial scales, and included in-depth interviews and analysis of quantitative data at the block, district and state levels. Moreover, the ESRC research team was careful in making a purposeful selection of districts (Midnapore as a positive example, Malda as a more problematic one) and of representative villages in the respective districts (for more details on the research methodology see Appendix II). Finally, for the identification of *characteristic processes* the use of a big sample size and statistical validity are not necessary. In any case, the expressed criticism motivated the EPPG team to **pay more attention than initially planned to the confirmation of research finding** by a broad set of stakeholders from all parts of Malda district in the course of the action research.

In the Malda village, the dissemination activities confirmed that levels of awareness among the poor are extremely low here. The attempt of local strongmen to control the event also verified the research findings on local patronage networks. In the village meeting in Midnapore, the participants, including local party workers, confirmed the findings of the ESRC research regarding CPM’s control over the *panchayats*.

The participants in **all intermediate stakeholder meetings in Malda**, including government officers, *panchayat* members, NGOs and political parties, **confirmed the**

research findings on people's awareness, information flow, accountability, and processes of (dis-)empowerment and local governance. Moreover, the stakeholders from all parts of Malda district reaffirmed that the ward we studied in detail represents the usual situation in the district rather than an exceptional one, thus validating the academic research.

Generally, **the intermediate stakeholders were more willing to admit the shortcomings of local governance in Malda than some officers and academicians at the state level.** This is remarkable given that many stakeholders in Malda would have an ulterior interest in rejecting the research findings that reveal the problems of the district and openly point to their own failures.

3.1.3 Additional Insights

The focus of the EPPG project was on disseminating the ESRC findings rather than generating new data. However, the action research generated a few additional insights to the more thorough academic research that contributed to the better understanding of Malda's difficulties. For example, the stakeholder meetings and additional individual interviews pointed to the **lack of political will and the lost connection** of the leadership of the political parties **with the rural poor.** For example, the CPM reversed the previous bottom-up structure built up during peasant movements and changed it into a top-down command structure with weak links to the grassroots. The party leadership tends to be young, transient and recruited from student mass organisations. The action research was able to identify **Gazole block as an exception of this general scenario.** There, the CPM party leadership is still rooted in the peasants' movement and thus very close to, and well entrenched with, the rural poor.

In the village meetings, the participatory depiction of the *panchayat* system revealed that the **villagers identify with the gram panchayat much more than with the higher tiers** of the *panchayat* system. The villagers are largely ignorant of the *panchayat samiti*. Unlike the *gram panchayat* members, the *panchayat samiti* members seem not directly accountable to the villagers. Their role and function remain non-transparent at the grassroots.

3.2 Awareness-Raising among the Poor

The village meetings in Malda and Midnapore concentrated on raising awareness among the poor, because particularly in Malda access to information had been identified as problematic. But even in Midnapore, levels of awareness of the *panchayat* system and development schemes were generally low. Awareness-raising concentrated on **people's rights and duties** in regard to the *panchayat* system, development schemes and the health and education sectors. Section 3.2.1 describes and assesses the applied methods of awareness-raising. Section 3.2.2 presents results from a quick quantitative evaluation on the retention of messages. Section 3.2.3 briefly describes wider impacts of the village meetings.

3.2.1 Methods of Awareness-Raising

The action research used village meetings for the dissemination of information to the rural poor. Thus, it was crucial to ensure good **attendance from poor and marginalised villagers**, including women and tribals. It is needless to say that timing and

choice of venue have an influence on attendance, particularly of the above-mentioned sections. The action-research team decided on the time and venue only after consultations with locals, including poor and marginalised villagers. Furthermore, the team concentrated on personally inviting the poor and destitute villagers. These **door-to-door visits** proved very effective in mobilising poor villagers, including marginalised women and tribals. This method can hopefully serve as a model for inviting people to *gram sansad* meetings, particularly in Malda. However, while one has some control over including marginalised persons, one has **little chance to exclude dominant individuals**. This can create heterogeneous groups, which need to be managed carefully by subdivisions into smaller groups and by “taking out” dominant individuals and assigning them special roles.

The action-research team experimented with **participatory learning methods**, including participatory graphic presentations, brainstorming sessions and role-plays. Furthermore, **conventional presentations** were applied to raise poor people’s consciousness on their rights in regard to the *panchayats* and development schemes.

In Malda, the villagers seemed not to care about the method of dissemination – whether participatory or in a more conventional presentation style. They remained attentive throughout the meeting. This may be explained with the fact that for many participants, this was the first time they could participate in such a meeting. The ESRC research found that only 23% of the poor have ever attended a *gram sansad* meeting here, and that most villagers are not informed about these meetings.

In Midnapore, by contrast, participants were not very attentive when information was disseminated in conventional presentation style (except for the presentation of research findings that was given at the beginning of the meeting). This reflects a sort of “meeting fatigue” among the villagers here. But the **participants liked and engaged very actively in the participatory exercises** (depiction of *panchayat* system, role-play on Village Education Committee). Generally, the action-research meeting was perceived as something new and very **different from the mechanically held gram sansads** and other meetings. There were strong requests to repeat this type of meeting both in the same and the neighbouring ward.

Although the vast majority of the participants in both Malda and Midnapore reported that they had **preferred the participatory learning exercises** over the conventional dissemination of information, the retention rates of messages seemed independent from the dissemination method (see below). However, it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that participatory learning methods are not more effective. Rather, the experience of the action research points to the **importance of well-trained and high-quality facilitators** for ensuring effective participation, particularly that of marginalised groups. The action-research team did not have access to a sufficient number of good facilitators. This impeded the awareness-raising campaign to some extent, an observation that is important for future replication of our work (see Section 5.3.1).

For future awareness-raising activities, a **team of high-quality facilitators needs to be developed and trained**, especially if participatory learning methods are to be used. Furthermore, it was realised that the relatively big ward-level meetings are likely to hinder participatory learning of the poor because middle-class people tend to dominate group activities. One may therefore **consider carrying out participatory learning in smaller groups** – for example in selected neighbourhoods (*para*).

The EPPG team also disseminated information on people's rights, the *panchayats*, development schemes, health and education through **handbills**, the context of which was explained verbally to the participants. Furthermore, the team built "**village libraries**" by distributing SIPRD booklets on the *panchayat* system directly and in a transparent manner to selected women of each village.

The quick quantitative evaluation one month after the village meeting indicates that the **handbills were fairly well read**. In Malda, 39% of the participants read the leaflets, or had them read by a literate relative or neighbour. In Midnapore, 49% of the participants of the village meeting accessed this written information. These figures are high given the low literacy rates (7+) of 48% in the Malda village and of 68% in the Midnapore village.

The **use of the new "village libraries" was particularly good in Malda**. 45% went to see the distributed books on *panchayats*. These books also seem to have had an impact on collective action (see Section 3.2.3). In Midnapore, only 14% went to see the books at their neighbour's. This probably reflects the fact that access to information is less pressing there.

The action research points to a **high potential for using written material** for the dissemination of information. However, this activity needs to be accompanied with verbal information in order to prevent misunderstandings.

3.2.2 Retention of Messages

The data on the retention of information disseminated in the village meeting is based on a **quick quantitative evaluation** one month after the village meeting. The evaluation is based on questionnaire interviews with 54 male and female poor participants of the village meeting in Malda and 49 male and female poor participants in Midnapore.

In Malda, 91% of the respondents reported that they learned something new in the meeting. In Midnapore, where the local *panchayats* ensure information flow to the grassroots, only 63% of the participants reported that they learned something new. **Retention rates were generally higher in Malda than in Midnapore**. The Malda meeting also faced lower initial awareness levels than the one in Midnapore, and thus better potential for a substantial impact.

Retention rates were very high in the case of information that was of immediate practical relevance for the participants' livelihoods. For example, 88% of the respondents in Malda remembered the minimum-wage rate while before the meeting only 25% knew the rate (disseminated through conventional presentation). 74% were aware that all voters are to be called for the *gram sansad* (disseminated through participatory learning). Before the meeting, only 26% were informed about this rule.

In Midnapore, 61% remembered the message about the illegality of contractor involvement for *panchayat* road works (disseminated through conventional presentation). Male participants showed much more interest in this information than women. 96% of the men, and only 25% of the women, remembered it. Previous qualitative research suggests that this information was not widespread before (although some respondents claimed to have known this before). Even the person who looks after *gram panchayat* works in the locality had not known that contractor involvement in *panchayat samiti* schemes violates the guidelines.

Regarding more abstract messages, retention rates were lower. For example, only 48% of the respondents in Malda, and 45% of the respondents in Midnapore, were able to remember the name of the elected body at the block level; i.e., *panchayat samiti* (disseminated through participatory learning).

The **messages distributed through handbills** also seemed to have been retained fairly well. In Malda, 42% of those who read the handbills remembered the message on the duties of health workers (for three quarters of them this represented new information). In Midnapore, 84% of those who read the handbills remembered this message (for half of them this was new information).

For the sustainable retention of messages and the avoidance of misinterpretation of messages at the village level, **more continuous efforts are required**. Such “campaigns” as initiated by EPPG cannot be sustained. Therefore, participation needs to be incorporated in the system. In West Bengal, the obvious vehicle for this is the *gram sansad* meeting (see recommendations on **strengthening the gram sansad** in Section 4.1). Apart from strengthening the *gram sansad*, there is also **limited scope for NGOs in Malda** to engage in awareness-raising on people’s rights.

3.2.3 Wider Consequences

The ESRC research identified that the withholding of information to the grassroots has contributed to the current situation of underdevelopment and disempowerment in Malda. The EPPG dissemination of information and one-time awareness-raising seems to have **influenced collective action**. The action-research team could assess these consequences only briefly. The exact mechanisms of these incidents of mobilisation and collective action would need closer examination.

The most immediate reaction to the village meeting in Malda was that a few male youngsters **challenged the present elected representatives for illegally employing contractors** in *panchayat* works. However, it seems that later the involvement of contractors was not challenged again.

Two weeks after the village meeting, about 60-70 **poor villagers agitated collectively against wage rates** below the government minimum rate. Their knowledge about the minimum wage rate seems to have helped them negotiating with the executing agent for better wages, although these remain below the government rate.

Led by middle-class persons who came to understand from the meeting that the community should play active part in monitoring development schemes, a group of **villagers questioned the quality of a newly constructed ICDS building**. Coming under grassroots pressure, the contractors tore down a badly constructed wall and felt compelled to rebuild it properly.

After having studied the distributed books on the *panchayats* and self-help groups in the new village library, a young middle-class woman motivated 13 local, including poor, **women to revive a self-help savings group**. One month after the village meeting, the group members paid in small amounts every week. However, the group had not been registered with the block office yet. This would be required if the group wanted to access government loans for self-help groups in near future.

In Midnapore, where information was not withheld from the grassroots, the impact of the village meeting was less dramatic than in Malda. But the local party workers were made aware of the importance of people’s awareness of rights even in a situation

where the poor generally do receive the benefits from the government (or where the party looks well after them). As a result of the village meeting, the *pradhan* included the text from one of the project's handbills on the spirit of local self-government in a leaflet given to all voters of the *gram panchayat*. This is certainly a step toward more accountability and transparency. However, local party workers had not (yet?) used their new knowledge about the illegality of contractor involvement to challenge their party bosses and *panchayat samiti* functionaries for not passing down this piece of information.

In the context of the studied Midnapore village, which has relatively open and reform-minded *panchayat* members and party leaders, **intensive work with (or targeted to) these intermediary stakeholders would probably have a stronger impact** on empowerment than the dissemination of information to the villagers. The poor seemed to find it unnecessary to know development schemes and their rights as long as they receive their benefits from the *panchayat*/party. This situation of “development without empowerment” indicates that raising people’s awareness is still necessary, even in relatively “advanced” areas such as Midnapore.

Half-day workshops or one-time campaigns at the ward level may be **catalytic events**. The village meeting in Malda seems to have influenced collective action. The better educated generally seemed to be more able to make use of the provided information, but they included their poor, uneducated co-villagers in their actions. The reactions in Malda indicate that people’s awareness has potential to lead to increased accountability of *panchayat* members. Furthermore, information has helped the villagers to **make more coherent demands** on the state and the *panchayats* – or on the executing agent of the state, the contractors.

However, information alone is unlikely to be capable of bypassing entrenched power structures and directly leading to empowerment. After the meeting in Malda, for example, some poor participants expressed their fear of speaking up against the powerful *panchayat* members even though they now are more aware of the *panchayat* members’ wrongdoing. **Information is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment.**

Furthermore, the **sustainability of collective action** depends on its outcome and success in terms of material benefits or evolution of empowering social capital. Political, social and economic structures can limit the success of collective action. For example, the revived women’s savings and self-help group in Malda had tried in vain to register their group with the local authorities and to receive further government booklets on education. This group will be discouraged if the bureaucracy fails to recognise them and to ensure them access to bank loans in the near future. Apart from awareness-raising, therefore, collective action **depends on a responsive local bureaucracy and *panchayat***. Otherwise, longer term “outside” support is required that higher awareness really has developmental impact.

3.3 Engaging Stakeholders in the Reform Process

The Malda stakeholder meetings described in Chapter 2 were an important and successful mechanism for engaging government officers, *panchayat* members, NGOs and (to a lesser extent) political parties in a process of critically assessing current practices and institutions of governance. As in the case with the rural poor described

above, the dissemination of findings from the previous academic research was an important part of our activities here. At the village level our primary intention was to disseminate factual information to the rural poor that was of immediate practical and strategic importance in improving their livelihoods (knowledge of the minimum wage, of the proper function of *gram sansads*, etc.). Here, by contrast, our aim was to present an analysis of current issues and problems for pro-poor governance that **enabled participants to reflect on current practice and suggest future changes**. Our presentations to the intermediate stakeholder meetings therefore raised the following issues (among others):

- **Awareness and information flow:** The current lack of information and awareness among villagers of government programmes and structures of local government were highlighted. It was stressed that these were not problems of the individual villagers themselves (to be blamed on “ignorance” or illiteracy), but rather were *systemic* problems of the local state’s failure to communicate, the deliberate withholding of key information, and the undermining of mechanisms for information dissemination.
- **Processes of Accountability:** The important roles of direct public scrutiny, bureaucratic checks and balances, and political supervision of elected members in achieving accountable local governance were discussed. Current problems in each of these mechanisms were identified, and participants invited to suggest improvements.
- **Co-ordination between stakeholders:** In each separate stakeholder meeting, participants were encouraged to reflect on the reasons for current poor communication between stakeholders and the possibilities for future co-ordination. This was also important theme of the final inter-stakeholder meeting.

Unlike the presentations to villagers, this process of dissemination of research findings did not present any factual information that was “new” to intermediate stakeholders. However, the analysis of processes of governance was new to many who would not normally reflect on their individual knowledge and experience in relation to such broader issues. Similarly, whilst for the villagers the retention of new information (and better still, evidence of poorer villagers acting on that information) provides evidence for successful action research, here different measures for our impact are needed. Perhaps the most significant indicator of our immediate impact are the number of recommendations for changing local government policy and practice that emerged from these meetings (see Section 4.1). Our presentations indicated the problems of pro-poor governance within Malda: it is important to stress that **these solutions came from the participants themselves**. Of course, such listings do not indicate that the participants will be able to take action (individual or collective) to change process of governance on the ground, they are however concrete evidence that participants were engaging with a process of reform.

Despite this success, it is important that we ourselves critically reflect on the way in which we worked with intermediate stakeholders within the action research project. As noted above, it proved more difficult to actively engage political party representatives within this process. More generally, careful thought needs to be given to the existing knowledge base and experience of each stakeholder group, and the incentives and limitations for each in contributing to the reform process. Here, we provide a very brief overview of the different stakeholder groups that we hope will be of use in any replication of this research. We do this in terms of the groups’ inherent *strengths* and

weaknesses, and the *opportunities* and *threats* presented by engaging each within the action-research process.

Panchayat representatives:

- **Strengths:** This group often has very direct contact with the electorate, and can “translate” innovations in governance in to terms directly understandable to poor villagers (more so than government personnel or many NGOs).
- **Weaknesses:** They are perhaps the group least accustomed to reflecting on processes of governance and, particularly at the *gram panchayat* level, representatives’ own awareness of government procedures and practices may be limited.
- **Opportunities:** Changing attitudes and practices within this group provides a key mechanism for the dissemination of pro-poor governance to the grassroots – building their faith and trust in institutions such as the *gram sansads* is very important for the day-to-day running of the *panchayats*.
- **Threats:** SIPRD’s normal contact with these stakeholders is within the context of training activities, which have hierarchical relationships between trainers and trainees. It is therefore especially important that facilitators of action research work listen to this group rather than talk at them – *panchayat* members must feel that their experience is respected if they are to really open up to this process.

Government personnel:

- **Strengths:** Aware of the ground realities of local governance, and particularly able to communicate this to academics/policy makers. Also have enthusiasm and genuine interest for reform.
- **Weaknesses:** Perhaps suffer from a focus on improving government *rules* rather than *practices*, and are often less able to directly communicate with the rural poor than other groups.
- **Opportunities:** Active engagement of this group can do much to strengthen formal accountability of the *panchayat* system. Further development of these opportunities is discussed in Section 4.3 below.
- **Threats:** Within Malda, this group tended to focus on corruption, and to place the blame for problems of governance largely with political parties. Whilst their observations were often pertinent, it is important that they are steered towards making concrete suggestions for improvement.

Political party representatives:

- **Strengths:** As per *panchayat* representatives, but often further enhanced by being in powerful positions that could pressurise unwilling elected members to change attitudes or behaviour.
- **Weaknesses:** Understandably, often the most reluctant to publicly engage with a process of critical reflection. Careful building up of trust with this group is essential to their active participation.
- **Opportunities:** Given their unquestioned control over *panchayat* activities, changing the attitudes and practices of this group provides the greatest single opportunity for improving pro-poor governance. This potential can be realised if reform is presented as being in this group’s self-interest in electoral terms, a theme returned to in Section 4.3.
- **Threats:** Wider difficulties of current political culture are described in Section 4.3. Within the action research process more specifically, there is a danger that

this group becomes the scapegoat for other participants: this could lead to further antagonism, and withdrawal from constructive dialogue.

Non-government organisations:

- **Strengths:** In some cases, NGOs are conducting long-term grassroots work that independently develops poor people's empowerment. These groups could be important additional allies in fostering pro-poor governance.
- **Weaknesses:** Spatial coverage of NGOs is far from universal, and many groups within Malda were primarily relief organisations that did not have a sustained grassroots presence (see Appendix III).
- **Opportunities:** The Malda research suggests that at present, NGOs are relatively unaware of government projects and programmes, and their potential to contribute within these (in terms of awareness raising and engagement of villagers) is under-utilised.
- **Threats:** Any engagement of NGOs within processes of local governance should be carefully negotiated with local political parties. Although positive co-ordination between these groups is possible, if this issue is not addressed directly, it is likely that village-level rivalries and jealousies between NGO workers and party activists will undermine much of their potential.

In terms of practical aspects of the methodology, the EPPG project recognised that comprehensive stakeholder engagement in big gatherings tends to be very time-consuming. For the replication of this action research, one may consider holding preparatory meetings and core sessions with key representatives

4 Recommendations

The action-research project aimed to develop “from below” suggestions and recommendations for improving pro-poor policy and practice of local governance. Section 4.1 contains these recommendations from the stakeholders in Malda. The encouraging reaction of the Principal Secretary of DPRD to these recommendations and the action research in general (see Section 4.2), as well as comments on wider implications made at the state-level concluding seminar, motivated the EPPG team to formulate additional wider recommendations in Section 4.3.

4.1 Malda Stakeholder Recommendations

The recommendations listed below **reflect the stakeholders’ own experience** of working in Malda – as government workers, *panchayat* representatives, members of NGOs and political parties. For the development of these recommendations, the sequence of the meetings during the action research was important itself, starting with the village and ending at the state level. We tried to provide the stakeholders, including the rural poor, opportunities to identify and present for themselves the problems they face and possible solutions. This innovative approach entailed some degree of risk, as it employed a process for which the results could not be determined in advance. Also, the positions from which the stakeholders made their suggestions are inevitably partial, bound to some degree by their own district-specific experiences and interests. However, employing a faster “top-down” process would have failed to truly engage with the real problems of local governance. Furthermore, developing recommendations from below allowed state-level officers to be informed about the **problems faced by the lower orders**. Some of these difficulties were already well known to the state-level officers; others may have gone unnoticed because lower-level officials do not report problems that appear too “trivial” – as one participant put it – to the higher levels. It should be noted that these recommendations **cannot be regarded as finalised, concrete policy recommendations**. Rather, they represent starting points for further discussion within GoWB and with a wider range of policy makers and advisers in the state.

The recommendations from the stakeholders are listed under subheadings addressing strengthening accountability (through the *gram sansad*, through bureaucratic checks and through corrective action by political parties), improving governance through co-ordination within the *panchayat* institutions, and improving governance through the involvement of wider groups of stakeholders.

4.1.1 Improving Accountability through Strengthened Gram Sansads

The existing weakness of *gram sansads* was noted in both the ESRC research and in our action research. As the *sansads* are a key site for making the *panchayats* accountable “downwards” towards the people, improving the operation of these meetings is therefore a key task.

Enhancing villagers’ participation

The following action points suggested by the stakeholder groups are already elements of the Convergent Community Action (CCA) programme. Regardless of whether CCA is active in a particular area, these could be incorporated as necessary practice

for all *gram sansad* meetings. All would require panchayat members – possibly with the support of party workers or NGOs – to be much more pro-active than they are at present:

1. Intensive, door-to-door campaign prior to the organisation
2. Organisation of cluster (*para*) meetings prior to *gram sansad* meetings for wider and more intensive consultation
3. Special campaign to encourage female attendance at the GS to be spearheaded by women panchayat members.

Maintaining villagers' involvement

Participation of the poor in *gram sansads* requires them to invest their time in these meetings – often at considerable inconvenience. Widespread participation of the poor will only be maintained if villagers believe that they will receive some benefit from these meetings, and that their viewpoints count. Suggestions made by the stakeholder groups to achieve this included the following:

4. Greater flexibility in time and timing of the meetings – in particular to avoid peak harvest times
5. Ensuring that the requirement for achieving quorum for all GS meetings is met, even for adjourned meetings
6. Stricter adherence to the decisions arrived at in the GS meetings
7. Flow of more untied funds to the GP and increase in its own revenue to ensure that the expectations voiced in GS meetings are properly taken care of.
8. Greater flexibility in the content of GS meetings, including more provision for the dissemination of information

Linking the people to higher levels of government via the Gram Sansads

Currently in Malda, *gram sansads* provide an imperfect mechanism for villagers' input into the business of the *gram panchayat* but no access to other levels of government. The following recommendations show that the *gram sansads* could be used to build accountability of higher-level panchayat bodies and raise awareness of block-level actions and programmes:

9. All GS meetings to be attended by a competent Block-level official
10. Closer monitoring of GS meetings by Block and District level officials
11. Participation of ZP and PS representatives in GS meetings to be enhanced
12. Discussion in GS of all developmental work to be undertaken by PS and ZP within the *gram sansad's* area to be compulsory.

4.1.2 Improving Accountability through Officials

Appropriate Training of Panchayat Officials

One major current problem noted in the action research was that *panchayat* functionaries are often not aware of the limitations to their power. Clearer laying down of rules would help to avoid some of the tension that can arise between government officers and *panchayat* functionaries, and lead to greater self-discipline from elected members. Timely delivery of training is therefore key – the election of new *panchayat* functionaries is a key moment at which a better culture of operation can be instilled. Therefore, the following changes in practice were recommended:

13. Senior civil servants should explain the basic tenets of financial accountability, and hand over a booklet containing provisions of financial and administrative procedures and responsibilities, to elected office bearers on the day of assuming office.
14. Training for all elected office bearers should be given within 6 months of their coming in to power.

15. Presence of BDO in *panchayat samiti* Standing Committee meetings (and of AEO in equivalent meetings of *zilla parishad*), to explain whether any decisions taken by them would violate financial norms and propriety.
16. Where decisions that violate financial norms and discipline are taken by the *panchayats*, the relevant official should refuse implementation of such decisions, and clearly explain the reasons for their refusal. Full support of senior officers is required in this instances.

Tightening of Current Accountability Structures

A tightening of current accountability structures is essential to ensure that more of government money reaches poor people. Although the following changes suggested by the stakeholders will not make the *panchayat* system corruption free, the measures would send a powerful message that corruption is likely to be identified and dealt with. The suggestions involve action at a variety of levels:

17. Beneficiary Committees to be formed properly through public meetings. Full explanation of the roles and responsibilities of beneficiary committee members to be given at such public meetings.
18. Information on when meetings for the formation of Beneficiary Committees will be held to be publicised in the GP office (and PS and ZP where appropriate), and made available to members of the public on demand.
19. Modification of the WB Panchayat Act, 1993, to make the Secretary of the *gram panchayat* (rather than the yet to be appointed Executive Assistant) a signatory to all bank transactions alongside the *Pradhan*.
20. Reconstitution of the Block Level Vigilance and Monitoring Committee, but with a government officer of the rank of Deputy Magistrate or higher as its chair.
21. Proper recording of the minutes of the meetings of General Body and Standing Committees of PRIs in the meeting itself to avoid behind-the-scenes manoeuvring.
22. Regular audit of GPs by PA&AO and EOPs, and regular audit of the PS and ZP by the Examiner of Local Audit and AG (WB) as applicable. One round of audit of the ZP and the PS to be completed mid-way through the tenure of a given set of elected representatives.
23. Inspecting Officers of *panchayats* (at all levels) to take a more pro-active role.
24. Proper and vigorous follow up action by higher competent authorities on audit and inspection reports, especially those indicating financial anomalies and embezzlement.

4.1.3 Improving Accountability through Political Parties

A third way of ensuring state's accountability to the poor is through the actions of the political parties. The District-level analysis indicated that Malda's political culture is a significant problem at present. Discussion with CPM and TMC party members identified the following issues as particular areas for concern:

25. Reconnection with rural people – networks of party activists are weak at present, weakening accountability
26. Corruption within all levels of all political parties was cited as a major problem – senior politicians within the District are therefore unable or unwilling to systematically monitor the practice of their own members

Despite these frank admissions on the part of the political parties, no concrete suggestions for improvement were forthcoming.

4.1.4 Improving Practices of Pro-Poor Governance

Co-ordination within the PRIs

Many recommendations were made to improve the day-to-day functioning of the *panchayat* bodies. In general, these aimed at strengthening the links between the lower tiers of the *panchayats* (where the poor have at least some contact with their elected members), and the higher tiers (where these contacts are rare). Some of these

recommendations are genuinely novel: others indicate that existing mechanisms for co-ordination are not working well at present.

27. Within the GP, the subcommittees are to be made functional, with specific and standardised areas of responsibility. Once GP subcommittee roles are standardised, these should be linked with the PS Standing Committees, and there should be two-way consultation between these.
28. Within the PS and ZP, the Standing Committees need to be held properly. Meetings of the Samannanya Samiti at the PS and ZP levels should be held regularly and these committees should play an effective role in inter-Standing Committee co-ordination
29. Prior discussion with the GP in case of the PS and with PS (if necessary with GP as well) in case of ZP before selecting schemes pertaining to their respective areas. Active involvement of the lower level panchayat bodies in schemes at the time of execution
30. For official and elected PRI representatives' co-ordination, regular and effective holding of monthly meetings should be held at the block level between the *Pradhans*, the GP Secretaries, the *Sabhapati* and the BDO. Similar meetings should be held at the district level between the *Sabhapatis*, the BDOs, the *Sabhadhipati* and the DM.

4.1.5 Involvement of Wider Groups of Stakeholders

Beyond the PRIs, political parties and NGOs (where present) can play a positive role in enhancing pro-poor governance. Recognition and encouragement of this potential by the PRIs and bureaucracy could help to strengthen the number of avenues by which the poor people can place positive pressure on local government. Suggestions received in this regard included the following:

31. Publication of information explaining all Government programmes to be made available to all actors in the development process at District level
32. Education and health services must be made more accountable through greater monitoring by PRIs, and NGOs where present. *Social* aspects of development need to be stressed by all development agents
33. More pro-active role from all political parties to generate awareness among the people on their rights in relation to the *Panchayats* and Government Departments
34. Greater PRI and bureaucratic recognition of NGOs potential advantages within development programmes, particularly: capacity building, organising various campaign activities (e.g. pulse polio, literacy), in information dissemination and in grassroots mobilisation
35. NGO forum at District and Block level with representation from the officials and elected panchayat functionaries to co-ordinate NGO activities with existing development work
36. Formation of a core group at the village level with the representation of political parties, NGOs and interested individuals to mobilise people around development issues, and to monitor schemes.
37. NGOs and political parties to attempt to improve relationships between themselves: both groups recognised that currently the relationship between them is often strained when NGOs take on developmental work.

It is significant that many stakeholder recommendations are actually incorporated in existing acts and government directives. This points to deficits in the implementation rather than the policies, and implies that changes in administrative structures alone seem not capable of enhancing pro-poor governance. This wider issue is taken up in Section 4.3.

4.2 Reactions from the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development²

The Principal Secretary of DPRD reacted very positively to the stakeholder recommendations. The stakeholder **recommendations were generally accepted**. Some, but not all, issues raised by the Malda stakeholders had already been known by DPRD. The Department had already debated many of the listed recommendations, some had even be tried – but sometimes in an unsystematic manner. It was assured that **the Department would review the list of recommendations very carefully, and introduce changes where necessary**. Even steps that require changes in the panchayat rules and acts were not ruled out. However, many recommendations related to a gap between an existing act/directive and its implementation or their incorporation, and so would require only minor changes in practice and/or directives.

In regard to the **recommendations related to strengthening gram sansads**, the government could consider building in more flexibility in the guidelines on the timing of *gram sansad* meetings (Recommendation 4). The Department is already discussing quorum requirements for adjourned *gram sansad* meetings (Recommendation 5), and has already given directives in regard to linking block officials to *gram sansads* (Recommendations 9&10), but with mixed success. Carrying out door-to-door campaigns, preparatory neighbourhood-level meetings, etc. (Recommendations 1-3) are laudable but such campaigns are difficult to sustain. Political solutions rather than bureaucratic means can enforce stricter adherence to the decisions arrived at in the *gram sansad* (Recommendation 6). GoWB has addressed the issue of strengthening *gram sansads* comprehensively through its Convergence Community Action (CCA) programme that runs in selected blocks.

DPRD regards the **recommendations on tightening accountability structures** relevant. Directives already exist in regard to the selection of beneficiary committees through public meetings (Recommendation 17) and the proper recording of the minutes of the meeting of the *panchayats* (Recommendation 18). But the Department has to take steps to enforce these. DPRD may consider introducing directives to publicise the names of beneficiary committee members in the in the *panchayat* office (Recommendation 18), and to make the Secretary of the *gram panchayat* a joint signatory to all bank transactions (Recommendation 19). The suggestion that all *panchayat* members receive training within six months of taking office (Recommendation 14) is good. But the *panchayat* members may need training every two years because the guidelines of schemes often change and new schemes are added.

Regarding **co-ordination within the *panachyati raj* institutions**, the Department may consider introducing block planning councils (on the lines of the district planning councils) that discuss and co-ordinate all developmental work in the area (idea from Recommendation 35 and discussions at the seminar). It is already mandated that regular meetings between *pradhans*, the *sabhapati*, the BDO and other government officers must be held (Recommendation 30), but this is obviously not followed. Similarly, it is surprising that holding regular meetings of the standing committees (Recommendation 28) came up as a recommendation. The district-level officers have already been advised to insist on prompt delivery of the reports of such meetings. The

² This subsection is based on the concluding speech by the Principal Secretary of DPRD at the state-level seminar in Calcutta on 6 January 2001. There, the Principal Secretary also raised wider points that are partly reflected in Section 4.3.

very fact that reports sometimes get delayed by one to three months indicates that the meeting has not taken place. This has to change.

The government must give serious thoughts on the recommendations of **involving wider groups of stakeholders**. Training of panchayat members may not be sufficient to create general awareness among the people. DPRD may consider launching a small pilot scheme for awareness-raising that includes government officers, panchayat members and members of the public (related to Recommendation 34). The government has already begun forming NGO forums at the district and state levels (Recommendation 35). By the end of March 2001, these should become functional. The CCA programme includes something like core groups at the village level for the mobilisation of people around development issues (Recommendation 37).

The government is currently addressing the issue of **making education more accountable to the local governments** (related to Recommendation 32) in the context of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution.

The Principal Secretary also indicated his desire that the stakeholder and other recommendations will be further discussed in another format and in a wider context.

4.3 Wider Issues and Recommendations

In this section we address some of the wider issues of importance in enhancing pro-poor governance that were raised through the action research project, and the academic study that preceded it. The first section, *Panchayati Raj: from participatory delivery to pro-poor empowerment*, builds outwards from a number of the more immediate concerns of the workshop participants that were addressed earlier in the report. Many participants in the seminars and workshops, especially at the lower levels, were concerned with the problems within the *panchayat* system as presently conceived: these resulted in the particular policy recommendations listed in Section 4.1 above. Reading between the lines of these particular recommendations, their comments suggest that after more than 20 years of *panchayati raj* in West Bengal a more radical rethink is required. Here we attempt to begin this process by considering how West Bengal's *panchayats* could evolve to further promote pro-poor governance in the decades ahead.

The second section, *Re-thinking Pro-Poor Governance: Wider Issues*, addresses three issues that emerged from the action research process. The first of these is the question of improving poor people's capabilities (or "human capacity building"). This was an important issue in the original academic study, and is addressed here because the relationship between competent governance and widespread education was raised repeatedly in the seminars and workshops by a wide range of participants. The second issue, the question of how to tap the potential of the bureaucracy to contribute to good governance, was raised in debate in the Calcutta workshop by the Director of DPRD and commented on by Principal Secretary, DPRD. The final set of observations relates to the role of political parties in delivering pro-poor governance. This is stressed here because (as noted in Section 3.3) political parties are key actors within the development process, and yet ensuring their engagement within the action research project proved difficult relative to other groups. In order that our recommendations are not restricted to a set of technical or bureaucratic concerns, we present

here some observations on the political contexts within which the delivery of pro-poor governance must be achieved.

4.3.1 Panchayati Raj: From Participatory Delivery to Pro-Poor Empowerment

The Issues

West Bengal's experiments with *panchayati raj* since 1978 have included many ground-breaking initiatives, and have resulted in significant achievements that the vast majority of independent commentators on West Bengal recognise and applaud. First, **participation in politics and local government has been widened**. High electoral turnout, with direct participation of Scheduled Castes and Tribes and women as both voters and representatives, suggest that a significant change in Bengal's political landscape has been achieved. Local politics is no longer the exclusive preserve of rich upper-caste households, and the status and dignity of those previously marginalised has undoubtedly improved as a result. Second, **the panchayats are securely established institutions with a degree of popular legitimacy and authority**. Elections are well-entrenched in the popular consciousness, local transfers of power from one party to another within a *panchayat* are usually smooth, and bureaucratic support for the institutions and ideals of *panchayati raj* is widespread. A high level of legitimacy of the institutions and their members has also been achieved: over and above their official responsibilities, *panchayat* leaders are often treated as authority figures to whom villagers will turn for support and advice.

These are very important achievements, and worthy of restatement. However, the action research, and the academic research from which it was developed, point up **some limitations** in West Bengal's *panchayat* system:

- **Lack of awareness.** Despite the high levels of participation in elections, meaningful and practical knowledge of *panchayat* institutions and their activities is far from universal, particularly amongst the rural poor. Even in Midnapore, 70% of the poor households surveyed were unaware of the distinctive features of the Employment Assurance Scheme. This is a stark reminder that there is no room for complacency when discussing the *panchayats'* role in popular participation, and that political and social marginalisation remain important issues in West Bengal.
- **Higher-level institutions remain 'distant'.** Whilst popular identification with *gram panchayats* and their leaders is often strong, block and district councils are still relatively remote institutions for the vast majority of the rural poor. Several of the policy recommendations discussed in the final stakeholder meeting in Calcutta (see Section 4.1) addressed this theme through calls for greater communication. We note here that the gap between the *gram panchayat* and the block council remains particularly stark and limiting for the rural poor.
- **A focus on programme delivery rather than innovation or empowerment.** Since their inception in the late 1970s, *panchayat* institutions at all levels have had increasing responsibilities for the delivery of centrally-sponsored development programmes. Sadly, in practice they have rarely moved beyond this role: debates on *panchayat* activities in the localities of the ESRC project often focused around who should get what from the *panchayat* system, rather than on any wider consideration of what the *panchayat* could or should be doing in any wider sense. **This popular perception of the *panchayats* as a delivery mechanism is damaging for the long-term future of pro-poor governance: it places the poor in a**

‘patron-client’ relationship with the state, and restricts further innovation and broader empowerment.

Recommendations and Ideas

1 Promoting sustainable popular participation

During the 1990s there were attempts to widen participation in the *panchayats* through a system of reserved posts for women, SC and ST candidates, and through the development of *gram sansads* (open meetings held at the level of an electoral ward) as an important forum within *panchayat* planning. These changes are welcome and show a sincere attempt to spread popular participation ‘outwards’ to previously marginalised groups and ‘downwards’ to encourage more direct participation in the decision-making process. **If these innovations are to be a success, especially those increasing direct participation, proper consideration of their longer-term sustainability is vitally important.**

- **Awareness-raising and political education.** As noted elsewhere, there is a lack of awareness of existing *panchayat* institutions and activities. Mass campaigns to raise awareness of the role and importance of *gram sansads* and *panchayat* members are an important first step in correcting this. Ideally, these would involve government personnel working with cross-party groups of grassroots political workers. Involvement of all local party workers in such a campaign would be important both logistically and in demonstrating cross-party support for the institutions. At present, such activities could be focused on blocks where *gram sansad* attendance is poor or declining; in future, implementation of community-based planning should be accompanied by similar prior mass mobilisation. SIPRD could play a role here in developing activities and materials for awareness-raising, and evaluating the effectiveness of these measures (See Section 5.3).
- **Developing realistic expectations of participation.** Direct participation should not be seen as a universal solution for any and all the problems of the *panchayat* system. Financial and time constraints will remain important limiting factors on the participation of the rural poor. Educational and skills constraints may also limit the usefulness of popular participation within the planning process. Realistic goals for participation have to be set that recognise these constraints.
- **Demonstrating the outcomes of participation.** For mass participation in the *gram sansads* and engagement with *panchayat* activities to be sustained, real benefits to the participants have to be demonstrated: a point that was made repeatedly in the concluding state-level seminar. The drawing up of schemes that are not implemented, or lists of beneficiaries for whom there are no resources, only undermines participation in the longer term. Broadening the role of *panchayats* beyond the implementation of centrally designed schemes will be important here (see below), but within *gram sansads*, *panchayat* members should also explicitly demonstrate the action that has been taken on previous decisions.

2 Building a supportive political culture

Wider issues of the role and importance of political parties in improving pro-poor governance are discussed below, but here we note two issues that are of immediate political importance within the *panchayats* as they currently operate.

- **Supporting the authority of elected members.** The ESRC research project provided evidence that key decisions surrounding *panchayat* activities were sometimes taken out of elected members' hands, and instead were made by local units of a member's political party. Advice from political parties is advantageous to elected members, and close monitoring of *panchayat* activities by the parties can help to build accountability. However, the removal of decision making powers can act to undermine the authority of elected members and ultimately the accountability of the *panchayats* as a whole. Especially within the CPI(M), senior party figures need to *monitor* elected members to ensure their political accountability, but should resist the temptation to *control* their activities on a day-to-day basis.
- **Engaging experienced politicians in *panchayat* positions.** These problems are reinforced when parties decide to field candidates who have a relatively junior position within the party. Due to the reservation of seats, this is sometimes inevitable, but all parties should agree as far as possible to field experienced candidates for key *panchayat* posts. This would be an important public demonstration of cross-party support for the position and authority of these institutions. The presence of such experienced political figures is also likely to be politically beneficial for the parties involved. Our experience suggests that rural electorates are often aware of the seniority of party workers: fielding a candidate who is seen as credible and effective will enhance the standing of the party as a whole.

3 Addressing capacity constraints

The wider role government personnel can play in developing pro-poor governance is discussed below. There is evidence that there are already capacity constraints within the *panchayats*. Further moves towards devolution or the expansion of *panchayat* activities are desirable, but will only exacerbate these constraints. This is therefore an important area for action.

- **Information resources.** Decentralised planning is unlikely to be effective without proper information management. The experience of the ESRC research project is that data on development schemes are hard to come by, and that comparison across schemes or areas is difficult. Particularly at the block level, investment in this area is important. Computerisation of records needs to be accompanied by the development of data storage systems designed to meet the needs of integrated local planning.
- **Staffing resources.** It was beyond the scope of this project (or the academic research that preceded it) to consider the appropriateness of levels of staffing within the various tiers of local government in detail. However, the continued trend of devolution of scheme implementation to the lower tiers of the *panchayats* requires that staffing resources should now follow suit. From the experience of the action research project, these constraints may now be particularly acute at the *gram panchayat* level, where the number and skills of staff are very restricted.

4 Innovation and the expansion of *panchayat* activities

The current government's desire to increase grassroots participation in the *panchayats* is laudable. However, in a context where local government depends heavily on the delivery of state-sponsored development programmes, this could generate increasing popular discontent due to the limited scope it leaves for *panchayat* and *gram sangsad* proposals to be implemented. If pro-poor governance with strong grassroots partici-

pation is to be sustainable on a longer term basis, innovation is needed in the amount and flexibility of funds, and in the areas where *panchayats* are encouraged to operate.

- **Local empowerment through untied funds.** The study of the Employment Assurance Scheme in our original academic research indicated that local innovation within centrally-sponsored schemes is low. Guidelines from New Delhi are often interpreted very rigidly, regardless of whether they are appropriate for local conditions. Experimentation with untied funds to the *panchayats* would help to ensure that existing funds flowing to *panchayats* met local needs, and would give real decision making power to the grassroots.
- **Resource mobilisation.** *Panchayats* could be encouraged to meet existing resource constraints through exercising their tax-raising powers, or experimenting in income-raising activities. Both activities were visible in Debra Block, Midnapore (levies on shallow-tube wells, use of government land as a plant nursery), but such activities appear to be limited at present, and could benefit from wider replication. Provision of matching funds from GoWB for resources raised would be one possible mechanism here: more simply, wider publicity and discussion of existing examples of good practice (including their incorporation within *panchayat* training activities) would be an important first step.
- **Playing a wider role in local governance.** As noted above, *panchayats* already have a degree of support and legitimacy from their electorates, and could exploit this to a far greater degree than at present. Under the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India, *panchayats* are now a fully-fledged key third tier of government alongside the States and the Centre. At present in West Bengal, the day-to-day functioning of *panchayats* in no way exploits this constitutional provision to the full. Greater use of these powers, channelled through appropriate institutional structures, would improve the delivery of local services (especially education and health), and engender local responsibility for these.

Together, these recommendations amount to a call for a significant broadening of the role of the *panchayats*. Taken seriously, they would require a rethink of the structure of government within West Bengal, including a change in the relationship between line departments, Ministries and the *panchayats*. The time for such a rethink is now due. At present, *Panchayati Raj* still has the potential to be a radical motor for empowerment and pro-poor governance in West Bengal. This potential needs to be realised quickly: the *panchayats* should not fossilise into sterile delivery mechanisms, and the poor need to have concrete experiences that confirm that their direct participation in local government is both relevant and effective.

4.3.2 Re-thinking Governance: Wider Issues

Changing priorities for development: building human capabilities

When the Left Front Government entered office in 1977, there were sound political and economic reasons for prioritising land and tenancy reform as issues within their development programme. The success with which the land issue has been tackled contrasts somewhat with West Bengal's record on improving basic human capabilities

through health and education provision. Whilst West Bengal leads the rest of India in the implementation of land reform, even the most generous of external academic commentators admit that the record of the Left Front Governments on education has been more limited.³ More generally, Human Development Indicators for West Bengal⁴ suggest that the State is performing slightly better than the all-India average, but not dramatically so.

Within the action-research project, a range of stakeholders (politicians, bureaucrats and NGOs) repeatedly blamed poor levels of literacy in Malda district for limiting the level and quality of the engagement of the rural poor with local government. Our response to this is not the same as that suggested by some stakeholders: that attempts at popular participation in government are futile in this context, or that only those with a formal education should be allowed to stand for *panchayat* election. We would see such conclusions as despondent and retrogressive. Rather, we would agree that pro-poor governance and actions to secure improvements in human capabilities are mutually dependent. As such, sustained efforts to improve West Bengal's health and education provision must go hand in hand with the changes advocated above.

1 Bringing education and health further up the political agenda

The early years of the Left Front Governments in West Bengal focused on land and tenancy reform, and on developing the structure and institutions of *Panchayati Raj*. Mass education was given more attention in the early 1990s with the literacy campaign drives. Whilst this raised popular awareness of the need for education, it was largely dependent on voluntary support, and few of the night-schools and classes set up were long-lasting. The political will for more sustained and dramatic improvements in the provision of education and health services appears to have been lacking, as shown by the many teaching posts lying vacant across the state over the 1990s.

This relative neglect of education and health provision at the state level is reproduced at the local scale. Throughout the ESRC research in Malda, we noted the distinct lack of interest of among local politicians (and *panchayat* members) in education provision relative to their close involvement in development programmes. A quick and cynical answer to this would be that there are limited opportunities for corrupt politicians to extract resources from education programmes. A fuller answer is probably that the Left Front Governments' heavy stress on economic development, and the use of the *panchayats* to distribute centrally funded rural development schemes has somewhat marginalised education and health provision within political debate in the Bengali countryside.

A change in politicians' priorities has the potential to change this situation dramatically. Although debates on the delivery of development funds tended to dominate much of the political debate in both Midnapore and Malda, we believe that there is much political capital to be made from a concerted push on health and education provision. Within our academic research, we probed villagers' attitudes to education in some depth: our results suggested that there is widespread desire for improvement in teaching quality, even among uneducated adults in Malda. A government that could

³ Lieten, G.K. 1992. *Continuity and Change in West Bengal*. Chapter 2. Delhi: Sage.

⁴ E.g., Drèze, J. and Sen, A.K. 1995. *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*. Table A3. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Shariff, A. 1999. *India: Human Development Report*. P. 5. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

deliver on this issue would therefore be doing much to secure its own electoral success, as well as boosting the long-term prospects of the poor.

2 Bringing education and health under effective pro-poor control

As well as raising the political profile of education and health provision, more could be done in West Bengal to bring the delivery of these services under effective pro-poor control. Within the *panchayat* system, standing committees at the block and district level have been constituted to look after education and public health. These standing committees have a long history, but at present largely confine their activities to the development of the physical infrastructure of schools and health centres: engagement of the *panchayats* in the planning, provision and monitoring of services appears to be almost non-existent.

In primary education, this appears to be leaving holes in the systems designed to secure public accountability of schools. The School Inspectors appeared to be over-stretched and ineffective, and the District Primary Schools Council seemed to primarily represent teachers' interests. Popular discontent with education services was widespread, but public pressure for improvement was largely ineffective. For many of the poor, the only easy access to "government" is via their local *panchayat* member and/or the *pradhan*: when the *panchayats* do not take an active role in the running of schools, an important mechanism for channelling popular pressure for improving services is lost. Through the Shishu Shikkha Kendra (SSK) programme and the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), there is currently experimentation with alternative avenues for ensuring public accountability. These experiments are welcome, but our research (in Bihar as well as West Bengal) suggests that the following issues need careful attention:

- **Improvement of services will not come through "goodwill" alone.** In the DPEP and the Bihar Education Project, there is great faith that the moral pressure exerted by community-based school management committees will change teacher attitudes and behaviour. Whilst this may have some effect in the short-term, real "teeth" need to be given to these committees if they are to deal with errant teachers. Monitoring the experience of community management of the SSKs, and transferring the lessons learned to the formal school sector, will be important here.
- **Community management of schools will not be effective in isolation.** Whilst community participation is important, it will not solve the wider structural problems of the education system. In particular, West Bengal's District Primary School Councils need to be constituted on a regular (rather than *ad hoc*) basis, and their role revised to ensure that they represent the needs and aspirations of students and guardians as well as those of the teaching profession. Beyond institutional changes, increased financial commitment to education will also be necessary: West Bengal's budgetary allocation to *elementary* education in the late 1990s was low in absolute terms, and low relative to the needs of the State.⁵
- ***Panchayat* education committees should play a greater role.** The PS education standing committees could play a useful and supportive role to village-level education committees, and be more pro-active in providing a parallel mechanism for ensuring accountability of formal schools. A clear division of duties and responsi-

⁵ See Roy, A., Kamaiah, B. and Rao, M.G., 2000. "Educational Expenditure of Large States: a normative view", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35 (17), 1465-1469.

bilities between these different bodies should ensure that their activities are complementary and compatible. This becomes especially important now that the *panchayats* are also involved in the SSK programme.

Although neither the ESRC nor the action research looked in any detail at the provision of healthcare provision, similar issues of relative political neglect and a lack of local accountability appear from anecdotal evidence to be widespread. Here, as with education, there is potential for the standing committees of block and district-level *panchayats* to play a role in monitoring the delivery of services.

Tapping the potential of the bureaucracy

The action research process in West Bengal revealed that there were a large number of committed civil service personnel who were willing to comment openly and constructively on current difficulties within the *panchayat* system (Section 3.3). Within the context of this action research project it was possible to provide the opportunity for these staff to share their experiences of local governance, and to make practical suggestions for changing policy and practice. Beyond the project, it is important that GoWB itself taps the immense potential these personnel – and their equivalents across the state – have for improving pro-poor governance.

1 Institutional learning through listening to stakeholders

Within this project, we achieved the enthusiastic engagement of civil servants by giving these important stakeholders a voice – opening up a novel space for debate, and encouraging people to use this. The symbolic importance of such activities needs to be recognised: even where the findings are not novel in themselves, the public recognition and recording of problems is important.

Future Action: Possibilities for replicating these activities should be explored. The presence of “outsiders” within our action research was a useful catalyst for a novel process of engagement, but there is no reason why such activities could not be undertaken entirely within the GoWB. District-based camps or workshops where Ministers and/or Secretaries directly meet junior officers could provide one such mechanism.

Important features of any such activity would be:

- **A stress on “learning from below”:** Explicit recognition that ground realities are not always visible from Calcutta, and that ideas, viewpoints and innovations coming from the field will be useful to policy makers.
- **Assurances to participants:** If people are to reflect on current practices of governance, they need to do so in the knowledge that constructive criticism will be valued.
- **Proper feedback and follow up:** Essential if stakeholders are not to feel that their involvement was not valued or mere tokenism.

2 Systematic incentive structures

It is not possible to perpetuate enthusiasm and energy for change through one-off events alone. Such events may raise morale, but it is even more important to build the day-to-day incentive structures that may be necessary if staff are to feel valued. At present, a point that was made clearly by the Director of the Department of Panchayats, government staff have limited incentives to innovate, and strong disincentives to control or challenge the wrong-doing of others.

- **Support over corruption.** A widespread perception of lower-level staff was that they were not supported sufficiently by their seniors when dealing with cases of corruption. Such support not only needs to be provided: it has to be *publicly seen* to be provided if the internal checks and balances of the civil service are to be used confidently and effectively.
- **Incentives for innovation and excellence.** Perhaps of equal or greater importance is developing an ethos where innovation and excellence are (and are seen to be) valued within the all branches of government personnel. There has to be far greater freedom to promote and publicly recognise public servants worthy of merit.

Future Action: It fell beyond the scope of the current project to suggest how these suggestions might be realised in a set of practical changes in institutional rules and regulations. Providing staff with a positive incentive structure is clearly an area where legislative changes – changes that would have an impact for all of West Bengal’s government personnel – will be necessary. The Principal Secretary, DPRD, observed in the concluding Calcutta workshop of our project that currently a minority of civil servants of courage and good character try to influence *panchayat* decision-making positively. We merely note here that research conducted elsewhere on the management of public institutions suggests that proper incentive structures can help to develop “good character”, and to strengthen the hand of this minority, regardless of their courage.

Party Politics and Governance

Within the Action Research project, despite our best efforts, the direct representation of political parties was relatively low. There were many elected *panchayat* members present at the local-level meetings – the vast majority of whom had stood for election on party tickets – but the direct involvement of local party leaders proved more difficult. Given that the action research and preceding academic study identified political parties as key players in shaping the form of local governance in West Bengal, we felt that it was important that they were not under-represented in this report as a result. The following observations are based on our experiences in 1999 and 2000, and also draws on Glyn Williams’ earlier research on local politics and governance in Birbhum District.

1 Direct Engagement with Political Parties

The engagement of party-political representatives in discussions about governance is essential in West Bengal. The level of politicisation of all areas of public life is very high, and parties play a key role throughout Bengali society. As noted above, our research has indicated that parties often play the role of a hidden “guiding hand” behind the actions of *panchayat* members, giving them a great indirect role in local government. Beyond this, political parties have important influence in decisions as varied as the siting of a new village clubhouse to the selection of a new vice-chancellor.

Given this all-pervasive role, further improvements in pro-poor governance are going to be impossible without the direct involvement of political parties at a range of spatial scales. The current research attempted to begin this process by engaging politicians in discussions about how their future role could be changed. Our success here was limited, and we note that there *are* difficulties with this direct engagement, including institutional limitations on SIPRD’s contact with political parties. Never-

theless, continuing to work with politicians is important. **Our research has strongly suggested that in providing good governance, changes in the political culture of West Bengal are at least as important as changes in the *panchayat* system. We are not simply labelling political parties part of the “problem”. Rather, we recognise that purely bureaucratic attempts to improve pro-poor governance will only provide partial solutions if they do not engage with political questions head-on.**

Some workshop participants referred to *panchayat* members as “puppets” in the hands of the political parties, and as lacking in any authority of their own. We do not subscribe to this view, nor to the view that *panchayats* should somehow be freed of party political concerns. Any reading of West Bengal’s recent history will see that it was a party-political movement that created *panchayati raj* in the state, and that this process engaged sections of the poor in local politics on an unprecedented scale. To argue that political parties should now be removed from West Bengal’s *panchayats* would be both unrealistic and undesirable. We argue instead that two changes in the role played by political parties – the broader culture of politics – are essential for the further development of pro-poor governance. We stress that these are cross-party issues, and will require cross-party discussions for their resolution.⁶

2 From “patronage associations” to promoters of political programmes

As is true in any democracy, political activists in West Bengal are not always driven by altruism or by faith in political ideology alone. For many getting involved in political parties, there is a strong expectation that personal and material benefits will result from party membership. Beyond party activists it appears that much of West Bengal’s electorate see their political participation as part of a similar exchange relationship: a swap of votes for immediate material support. We are not talking of grosser forms of corruption here, but rather of a wider “patronage mentality” whereby political leaders have their own circle of beneficiaries whom they foster through partisan use of their power. Malda’s political history appears to have led to this being a particularly acute problem in the District, but it is undoubtedly common across the State (and elsewhere in India).

The long-term effect of parties’ role as “patronage associations” within West Bengal’s *panchayats* appears to be that local political debate centres almost entirely around questions of corruption/partisanship. This is ultimately limiting because it stops a wider and more positive debate about what rule could be used *for*. Parties that actively promote political programmes by contrast give the voters – including the poor – genuine choices. **For all parties, moving beyond the single issue of “corruption”, and clearly presenting alternative political agendas at a grassroots level is vital to the furtherance of pro-poor governance in West Bengal. Whilst the mechanisms of local democracy, such as the election process, are securely established, all parties need to take an active role in improving the content of political debate.**⁷

⁶ Given the current political tension within West Bengal, such discussions will not be easy in the near future. This does not diminish their importance in the longer-term.

⁷ In the past, the CPM and its allies have certainly played such a positive role, although this role is probably less clear to the rural poor today. A CPM participant in our workshops frankly stated ‘whatever other parties do, we need to rebuild our connection to the people’: certainly in Malda, and most probably elsewhere in the State, this is a message all parties should listen to.

Moving beyond political violence

West Bengal has seen in recent times numerous instances of political violence, and it is important to recognise the significance of this for pro-poor governance. In part, this violence is due to the short-term electoral calculations of lower-level functionaries of political parties - whether they are locally in power or in opposition. More broadly, it suggests that in parts of West Bengal the culture of politics places local party leaders in position of *dadas*, or strongmen, and here there will always be the potential for violent conflict. All parties in West Bengal need to recognise the long-term difficulties such local strongmen can produce: where violence does erupt, the victims are more often than not found among the poor and marginalised sections of society. West Bengal is not extreme in its level of political violence, which is probably lower than that of many other Indian states. West Bengal is, however, in the fortunate position of having political parties with a relatively high degree of internal discipline. **One of the greatest challenges facing all political leaders in West Bengal today is to use their parties' discipline to ensure that the conduct of their own members towards their political opponents remains peaceful at the grassroots level.**

To reiterate, we do not raise these problems of Bengal's political culture merely to pin the blame for difficulties in pro-poor governance on its politicians. We recognise that building political parties that are capable of close and constructive work with poorer sections of the electorate is not an easy task. There is, however, scope for change, and political advantages for parties engaging in the reform process. The benefits of controlling the electorate through patronage or repression of political opponents may be difficult to relinquish in the short term. In the longer term, they are far outweighed by the benefits of creating a party whose political programme is understood and trusted by the majority of the rural poor.

5 Sustainability, Replication and Further Action

5.1 Partnership

SIPRD agreed to be partner of this action-research project that included the dissemination of findings of the original research and the exploration of suitable avenues for enhancing pro-poor governance through convergent intervention in identified areas of concern. This decision was taken after the ESRC research team initiated discussions with GoWB and SIPRD on the proposed action-research project and on possible forms of collaboration in June 2000, and GoWB, including the Minister-in-Charge, Panchayats and Rural Development, gave a positive signal. **SIPRD's engagement in research and training in the field of participatory rural development was in unison with the objectives of the action-research project.** This was **SIPRD's rationale of collaborating** with the ESRC research team.

SIPRD was an **equal partner and involved in all activities** of the action research, including designing the logical frameworks for the stakeholder meetings, preparing the evaluation questionnaires and interview strategies, organising and hosting the state-level inception seminar/workshop, and giving logistical support for all other meetings. An SIPRD faculty member was directly associated with the project, whereas the Director of SIPRD personally monitored the inputs provided by his faculty. Other SIPRD faculty members took active part in the state-level inception and concluding seminars.

The Institute was able to draw **useful lessons** from the collaboration in EPPG **for its future plan of action**. First, the Institute **owned the framework** of the action research. Second, the **way the research findings were disseminated** through a series of meetings at the village, district and state levels was found to be of tremendous use. Third, SIPRD was impressed with the reactions emanating from the stakeholder meetings. This was particularly true in the case of the village meeting in Malda that was found to have **wider connotations for rural development activities** not only in Malda district but throughout the state.

The partnership between the core research team and SIPRD has been a very positive one. Because of the positive feedback to the research findings and the lessons learned in the joint action research, SIPRD has **plans of embarking on the replication** of both the original research (in other areas and on other development schemes) and the action research (with the collaboration of local NGOs).

5.2 Replication

5.2.1 Replication of Original Research

SIPRD was impressed with the ESRC research methodology, particularly with the combination of detailed village studies using quantitative and qualitative methods and the employment of semi-structured interviews at various levels of the state that involved constant moving up and down spatial scales (see appendix II for more information on the research methodology). SIPRD believes that this sort of research should be replicated in a modified form for the study of a variety of poverty-alleviation programmes, such as JGSY, EAS, SGSY, IAY and NSAP, possibly in four districts representing the agro-ecological zones of West Bengal. The methodology of the

action research to engage various stakeholders could be replicated in a later phase. SIPRD has drafted an outline of a research proposal in this regard (see Appendix V) that, however, needs more discussion and elaboration. The aim of such research would be to identify the ground realities of the various poverty-alleviation programmes, and the opportunities and constraints for pro-poor governance led by the principles of people's participation and facilitation by the *panchayats*.

5.2.2 Replication of Action Research

Furthermore, SIPRD is considering replicating the methodology of the action research in a modified form. The Institute has the intention to work with NGOs for raising people's awareness in more sustained ways. Stakeholder and co-ordination meetings are suggested to take place at the *gram panchayat* and block level. Rajadighi Community Health Services Society (RCHSS), a Malda-based NGO that was employed for facilitating the village meeting, has already shown its interest in such collaboration with SIPRD, and is likely to approach the Institute with a project proposal. If such a project can be taken up, SIPRD intends to engage various stakeholders, such as villagers, *panchayat* and government functionaries, political-party and NGO representatives, in the sharing of experiences and innovative ideas on improving the activities related to governance at the grassroots (rather than the dissemination of research findings). RCHSS will be asked to prepare a comprehensive project proposal in this regard.

5.3 Implications for SIPRD and Action Points

5.3.1 Dissemination of Information to the Grassroots

Wider Application of Participatory Learning and Action Methods

In course of the action research, EGGP experimented with tools and techniques of participatory communication (see Section 3.2). The participatory tools were very effective in engaging the participants in the village meetings. The initial response of the poor to these activities were very positive and encouraging. However, the participatory communication process did not necessarily have greater leverage as far as the recollection of messages is concerned. This was largely because lack of a sufficient number of skilful facilitators in the meetings.

SIPRD conducts Participatory Learning-and-Action (PLA) activities in training courses, but these exercises are usually restricted to programmes such as watershed development and participatory planning. EPPG opened up a tremendous set of possibilities for the application of PLA tools even with the illiterate village mass, and enhanced SIPRD's commitment to extending the application of these tools to other areas of intervention. Indeed, SIPRD has already applied lessons from the action research: it introduced changes in the approach of preparing participatory plans in village meetings under the CCA programme. SIPRD further proposes intensive training for identified local-level resource persons and PLA facilitators/villagers. This element can easily be built into the activity-framework of CCA.

Development and Dissemination of Communication Material

In the course of the action research, SIPRD developed four handbills that were distributed to the participants of the village meetings (see Section 3.2). This was the

other important method of disseminating information to the grassroots. The handbills were brief, precise, written in lucid language and provided the readers with concrete and relevant information. These written materials were found to be very effective. Many villagers read the handbills and kept them. Furthermore, the NGOs participating in the action research showed keen interest in the handbills.

SIPRD considers carrying out a project to further develop these leaflets, and distribute them through interactive village meetings (see draft outline of project proposal in Appendix V). The collaboration of committed NGOs might be useful for this purpose. SIPRD's initial plan is to organise a workshop at the state level with selected NGOs and *panchayat* functionaries to further develop the communication materials. If such a project is implemented, it will include pre-testing of the communication materials in sample villages on the basis of which further modifications would be made. A two-stage training intervention would follow in order to operationalise the dissemination process. In the first stage, there will be "training of trainers" at the state level followed by training of facilitators at the district and sub-district levels. These facilitators would be responsible for conducting the village meetings and distributing the large number of printed handbills while explaining their content to the rural poor.

Pilot Project on Village Libraries

EPPG also created village libraries as a device for information dissemination. During the village meetings a conscious effort was taken to provide selected women from the village clusters a set of booklets developed by SIPRD and originally meant for elected *panchayat* members (see Section 3.2). Most poor villagers had access to these books; almost half of them had actually started reading or consulting them. The content of the booklets proved to be useful and relevant for ordinary villagers as well. SIPRD is planning to carry out this activity in a selected *gram panchayat* as a pilot project. After evaluating the results, SIPRD may think of wider applications of this process.

5.3.2 Training of Functionaries

The action research made SIPRD aware that a comprehensive initiative for timely training of *panchayat* functionaries should be undertaken. It was unanimously stated by all stakeholders that for ensuring accountability, transparency and empowerment of *panchayat* members, timely training is very important. However, a considerable number of elected *panchayat* representatives who participated in the action research had not received any training even after a lapse of more than two years. Even those who had received training, did so after a considerable time lag.

SIPRD reacted to this issue and analysed its constraints in organising training programmes for elected *panchayat* members. The major constraint is the sheer number of *panchayat* members who must be provided training: West Bengal has about 70,000 elected *panchayat* members in the three tiers. After the *panchayat* elections in 1998, SIPRD developed a systematic training plan for the *panchayat* functionaries. The original plan was to provide training at SIPRD for all the ZP members, the chairpersons of the 10 ZP standing committees in each district, and the *sabhapatis* and executive officers of the PS. For the training of the chairpersons of the 10 PS standing committees and the other PS members, *pradhans*, *upa-pradhans* and other GP members, the plan was to develop a core team of trainers who will train the functionaries in the districts. These trainers were supposed to be trained at SIPRD (Training of

Trainers). This detailed plan was developed after a series of workshops with the state and district-level functionaries.

However, it was found that a considerable time had elapsed before the entire system could be implemented. The compulsion of dealing with emergencies like floods, droughts, elections, etc. will always be an issue for the district and sub-district level trainers and trainees alike. This naturally results in slow implementation of the training plan.

Multi-Step Training Approach

However, the stakeholder recommendations made SIPRD consider implementing a cascading approach instead of the detailed training intervention at one go. In a first step, right on the day of oath-taking, the personnel administering the oath-taking could be entrusted with the task of providing the very first sensitisation input. A couple of essential books containing do's and don'ts could be handed over to the *panchayat* members during the ceremony itself. It will not be difficult to develop such documents with the help of existing booklets of the Institute. Certain additional inputs may have to be included.

In a second step, further specific, targeted intervention, such as a short-duration training for different office bearers, would be carried out. Only in a third step, the comprehensive training intervention (say for one week) covering most of the aspects of the *panchayats* and rural development would be carried out.

Given its limited capacity, it may be difficult for SIPRD to organise this cascade of interventions. Therefore, a set of distance learning modules need to be developed. The process of video conferencing with two-way communication between the faculty at the Institute and prospective facilitators at the district headquarters may be arranged for cutting the time lag and transmission loss. Involvement of more NGOs in the process of training could also help in mobilising effective trainers and utilising their existing training infrastructures.

Advising Cluster Meetings Prior to Gram Gansad

Another point relates to the content of the training modules. EPPG was successful in ensuring very good attendance in the village meetings by visiting people door-to-door. Convening preparatory *para* meetings following such visits have great potential to ensure higher attendance in the *gram sansads*. This particular exercise has strengthened our conviction that *panchayat* functionaries should be advised in their training at SIPRD to organise cluster meetings and sensitise the villagers before organising the *gram sansad* meetings. This may enhance the participation of villagers in the entire process of planning and rural development interventions. This particular element may be woven into the general framework of training for the *panchayat* functionaries.

Advising on Inter-Tier Co-ordination of the PRI Bodies

The village meetings showed that the villagers identify themselves most strongly with the *gram panchayat* and are often unable to even recognise the higher tiers. SIPRD will give the feedback to the participants of its training courses that the *gram panchayat* should therefore be given more power in the implementation of rural development programmes than the *panchayat samiti* and the *zilla parishad*. The role of the middle-level tier may be mostly restricted to providing supervision and guidance, whereas the highest tier may take policy decisions within the general framework of

national and state policies. This tier could provide guidance on the one hand and outside linkages on the other.

Party Politics and the Panchayats

The action research has shown the ominous trend of the weakening of the *panchayati raj* institutions by local political functionaries that can lead to clinching of development activities by vested interests (see Section 4.3.1 for a comprehensive discussion). For example, in the participatory depiction of the *panchayat* system, illiterate women in Midnapore drew eight village-based persons, including party workers and the GP member. Only after further probing, they were able to identify the institutions of the *gram panchayat* and the “block” where they also could go for redress. The ranking of the persons and the institutions that the villagers with developmental needs would turn to revealed the primary importance of the pro-active party workers (belonging to the same party and to a more or less regimented political set up). This particular exercise opened our eyes to the existence of rank politicisation of the panchayats. This made us think that the political parties should make it a point to project the *panchayats* and the *panchayat* members as institutional entities entrusted with the task of spearheading the development activities. The role of SIPRD in this regard could be to discuss this issue in the training programmes. The emphasis will be on strengthening the institution of *panchayats* and extending the scope for innovation, and how this can be done within the present framework. SIPRD is also contemplating a series of case studies to validate this exploratory finding.

5.4 Sustainability

SIPRD seriously considers the replication of the action research, the introduction of the above-mentioned action points, and the use of the original research methodology for more policy-applied purposes. This goes far beyond what we could have hoped for at the beginning of this collaboration. EPPG has thus good chances to achieve sustainability. In this regard, the close involvement of the Institute in the whole action research was key and let SIPRD develop a sense of ownership of the project.

The Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, GoWB, was also involved in crucial stages of the action research, such as the state-level inception and concluding seminars. We are confident that the Department also feels some sense of ownership of the recommendations put forward. This will further enhance the sustainability of EPPG. The initial response from DPRD was very positive, and the recommendations seem to be in accordance with the goal of the Department to enhance pro-poor governance through strengthened participation. We hope that this action research – in the words of the Principal Secretary – will assist GoWB in moving in the direction toward participatory development a little bit faster.