

Voices of the Youth: Synthesis of Youth Consultations in Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a synthesis of “youth voices” from consultation meetings carried out with twenty-three youth groups by the authors in four parts of Bangladesh – Chittagong, Dhaka, Rajshahi and Sylhet. The major variations in the youth groups were according to gender, socio-economic status, education, religion, ethnicity and location. The consultation meetings were focused on five key transitions that youths experience and are, according to the WDR, key in addressing youth development concerns: (1) transition to continuing education, (2) transition to work, (3) transition to family formation, (4) transition to healthy and secure lifestyles, and (5) transition to meaningful citizenship. With each key transition, we focused on how the youth are planning for the future, in terms of what they aspire towards, the major sources of risk and/or threats, and the limited control youths have over certain key decisions regarding their future.

In selecting the youth groups to consult, we wanted to ensure that we reached the mainstream youth, groups of youth who may be especially disadvantaged because of religion, ethnicity, socio-economic background etc., and potential “change agents” of the future. On this basis twenty-three groups were selected for consultations in four regions of the country. The consultations took place with 10 to 12 youths and, generally, lasted close to two hours. The consultation followed a loosely structured methodology, whereby the five key transitions and associated questions of aspirations, apprehensions, level of control and planning. Side by side, we conducted a small-scale survey with 227 youths in three of four study divisions, excluding Dhaka. The profile of our survey sample corresponded roughly with the variety of youth groups we consulted in the three regions outside Dhaka.

Generally, the different groups of youth appeared to have a sense of purpose, a sense of direction, and a multiplicity of plans about how to achieve their larger goals. At the same time, they were conscious of the limitations they had in taking decisions and achieving goals. However, there was a sense of being able to work with and around limitations and risks. On balance, we would say that the youth groups we spoke to are practical, pragmatic, and goal-oriented. Further, only about half of the youth groups regularly communicate outside Dhaka, most commonly through phone. A small minority of youths use email or text messaging (SMS) services.

The overarching aspiration of most youth groups was to achieve economic independence or, in their own words, *nijer paye darano* – “stand on their own feet”. If this counts as a baseline aspiration, a lot of youth groups aimed higher. Youths currently enrolled in various stages of education aspired to do better “than their parents”, in terms of economic wealth as well as social status. One female youth group, in Sylhet, aspired to get married well rather than to establish economic independence. However, every other young women’s group spoke of the importance of economic independence, rather than of depending on a husband. The young professionals we consulted aspired to professional and career success. The politically active students in Jahangirnagar University and the foreign-educated youths aspired to bringing about large scale changes in Bangladeshi society. These overarching aspirations are key to understanding how youths think of the five key transitions, and their relationship with each other, as different youths aspire to build and lead the types of lives they desire.

In terms of the transition to continuing education, most youth groups aspired to a university education, as it was felt that a university education provides a good job. In terms of the transition to continuing education, most youths we spoke to associated education with employment prospects, particularly formal sector salaried employment. Hence, youths desired to educate themselves to the extent necessary to get a job. Rural girls in Sylhet had lower aspirations because they felt that an SSC degree was enough to find a good husband. Also, young women could teach with an SSC degree. The major threat is being forced to drop out before completing education. The major causes of dropping out are poverty and child labour, early marriage, lack of application in studies, mixing with

bad boys or girls, limited opportunities for further education, uncertain returns to education given the current labour market situation, and low levels of community awareness about the value of education. Parents or family member are in control of the youths education in terms of the decision when to drop out. Other than that, there is not much parental control over subjects to study. Planning the transition to education, therefore, becomes difficult – given lack of financial control. The best a young man or woman can do is to excel in their studies. The major policy demand articulated by youths were (1) flexible schooling, so that school work can be combined with income earning activities, and (2) part-time work for university students so that they can support themselves in higher education.

In terms of the transition to work, the major aspiration is for salaried employment, which is above all else, associated with higher social status. However, uneducated and poor youths who do not have enough education to get these types of jobs – allied with status – many of them aspire to start a business. Although many educated and better off youths have a positive perception of self-employment, they do not aspire to it themselves and their first preference is for status-enhancing, formal sector, salaried employment. There is also a strong aspiration to go abroad, even if for a few years, to work and save money. This aspiration is stronger among men than women. The main threat in terms of finding a job is the tight labour market, where there are many applicants for few skilled jobs. Additionally, the labour market is perceived to be corrupt and nepotistic, where qualifications do not matter as much as the ability and willingness to pay a bribe or the kin connections (*chachas mamas*), who might be able to get jobs for their nieces and nephews. There are a couple of strategies for distinguishing oneself in the labour market – firstly, by getting as many degrees as possible or, secondly, by paying the necessary bribe. In terms of self-employment, the lack of access to capital and loans is the perceived to be the major obstacle. In addition, the overall environment for business, excessive bureaucratic red tape, and a general lack of security and certainty are other major obstacles. The policy demands voiced by youth groups in terms of salaried employment are: (1) creating more formal sector jobs in diverse sectors, such as science and technology, (2) addressing the problems of corruption and nepotism in the formal sector labour market, (3) creating job centres for youths of varying degrees of qualification to make the search for work much easier, and (4) in urban areas, day care centres so that women can combine paid formal sector employment with child rearing. In terms of self-employment, the policy demands are for (1) loan schemes, and (2) vocational training.

With regard to the transition to family formation, most youths – both male and female – would like to get married and raise a family after they are able to “stand on their own feet.” It was widely felt that the appropriate age for marriage for women is in the early to mid twenties, and for men, in the mid to late twenties. Traditional gender-based stereotypes of family roles of men and women persist, though several of the youth groups, both male and female, told us that women should be more independent of their husbands. Both male and female youth groups said that two children was the perfect number, because it is expensive to give children all the opportunities that they need to get ahead in life. The major risk in terms of a ‘happy’ family life was the threat of domestic violence. Domestic violence was also linked to poverty and dowry demands. Amongst ethnic groups, it was linked quite strongly with alcohol consumption. Familial or parental control over *who to marry* was, by and large, not resented by the youth groups. There was, however, considerable resentment at parental control over the decision of *when to marry*. Most youth groups felt that they would be forced to marry earlier than they intend to because of their families. The major threats to a happy family life were in the forms of early marriage and dowry.

The transition to a healthy lifestyle is, by and large, viewed as an outcome of successfully “standing on one’s own feet.” Hence, for most youth groups, successfully transiting to continuing education and work would lead to a healthy and secure lifestyle. The major threats to health are from sanitation, poor nutrition, hard manual labour, and poor quality or expensive medical services. Poor people are also perceived to be more vulnerable to such threats. Therefore, escaping or avoiding

poverty is the best way to ensure a healthy lifestyle. Drug use is also strongly associated with unemployment. Hence, a successful transition to work is the best way to overcome drug abuse. The major security threat that youths perceive is from the rise of religious militancy. Interestingly, the onus for overcoming religious militancy does not fall, in youth perceptions, on the state exclusively. In fact, as several youth groups told us, the “general public” has to be alert, aware and active in solving the problems of militancy.

For most youth groups, the transition to meaningful citizenship – in terms of giving back to communities and engaging with the community – takes place later in life, after having achieved success in personal life and after having built one’s family. However, meaningful citizenship can also be achieved through success in transitions to work. Professional excellence is a good way of contributing towards society. Proficient, honest and efficient doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc., as several groups of youth told us, give a lot to the communities in which they work. Also, achieving success in business is good, because it creates employment opportunities for other people. By and large, the youth groups are turned off by politics. Interestingly, two of the youth groups approached this issue differently: politically-active students in Jahangirnagar and foreign-educated youths defined the kind of work and education they aspire to in terms of how they want to serve the country. All the youth groups, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, location or class, look at politics as an illegitimate means of amassing wealth, and not as a means of serving the public interest. Very few of the youths we spoke to, expressed any interest in joining formal politics.

This report is a synthesis of “youth voices” from consultation meetings carried out with twenty-three youth groups by the authors in four parts of Bangladesh – Chittagong, Dhaka, Rajshahi and Sylhet. The major variations in the youth groups were according to gender, socio-economic status, education, religion, ethnicity and location. In the consultation meetings, we spoke to groups of 10 to 12 youths (who shared a pre-defined set of common characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, etc.) about their aspirations, apprehensions and plans regarding the future with respect to continuing education, building livelihoods, forming families, staying secure and healthy, and engaging with their communities or the nation. In this report, we attempt to synthesize the diversity of voices into a coherent narrative, without losing the complexity, richness and diversity of the various voices we heard during our consultation meetings. Further, we complement our synthesis with statistical data from an instrument-based, small-scale survey.

In the next section, we discuss the theoretical framework behind the consultations and attempt to justify our analytical focus on youth aspirations, apprehensions and plans with respect to five “key transitions”. In the section after that, we discuss the methodology, which was a combination of an loosely-structured group discussions and a questionnaire-based survey. We also describe the different groups of youth with whom we held consultations, the rationale behind our choice of groups, and try to identify important groups who we could not consult due to time shortages.

In the subsequent sections, we present the results of these consultation meetings, trying to bring together, the “voices” of different youth groups.

I. The theoretical framework

It is usual to define youth as an age range capturing a particular period in individual life cycles during which that individual moves from childhood to adulthood – from economic and social dependence (usually, but not always, on one’s immediate family) towards economic and social independence, or self-sufficiency. This transition takes place over several dimensions. A friend of mine used to say that growing up meant answering three questions: who, what and where? In other words: who will you marry; what will you do for a living; and where will you live? In a similar spirit, the World Development Report (WDR) has identified five key transitions that characterize youth:

- Transition to continuing or higher education
- Transition to work and/or employment
- Transition to family formation
- Transition to healthful and safe lifestyles
- Transition to meaningful citizenship

The key transitions chosen by the WDR are, in our opinion, comprehensive. The question of “where” – posed earlier and seemingly excluded by the WDR schematic – is subsumed under the various themes: “where” to go for education, for work, to form a family, or to lead a safe and secure life. Other questions regarding transition can also, we believe, be subsumed under this schematic. Another transition that is seemingly excluded is that of religious or ethnic identity – how does one transition to being a “good” Muslim or Hindu or Christian or a “good” member of any other religion or ethnic community? However, being a “good” XYZ usually has important implications in terms of family formation or lifestyle or citizenship.

The comprehensive nature of the WDR key transitions gives it considerable analytical value. We structured our consultation meetings around these key transitions and were reasonably confident that we would be able to cover all the major issues that the youth consider important. Arguably, however, some themes – especially, in the context of Bangladesh, migration – deserves separate thematic analysis, rather than being subsumed into the above five.

What about the youth themselves? How do they look at the transitions that they are experiencing? We hypothesized that the youth are active agents, consciously pursuing certain goals, striving to build desirable futures, and trying to shape the course and outcomes of the transitions they are experiencing. The other possibility was that the youth are “fateful”, passively waiting for the years to pass, and adulthood, with all its transitions, to happen, as fated.

The “voices of the youth”, we felt, should reflect their active engagements across the five key transitions. The voices of the youth should tell us about how different groups of youth are striving to educate themselves to a certain level; build sustainable and rewarding livelihoods; form the families they desire; lead the lifestyles they desire; and engage with the community or the nation. The voices should not be merely about opinions or perspectives on the transitions they are experiencing, as if they have no say over the matter. Rather, the voices are of empowered and active agents, who are building and shaping their future lives.

Aspirations, Apprehensions, Control and Planning

Aspirations are desired future outcomes and, in this context, refer to the types of futures that youths' desire.

With respect to education, it refers to how far they want to be educated, and what type of education they want. With respect to family formation, it might refer to who they want to marry, whether they want a nuclear or joint family, and how many children they want. Aspirations are not idyllic daydreams; e.g., a young girl in a Dhaka slum may dream of being a Bollywood star, but actually aspire towards opening a small cosmetics store. Aspirations are, therefore, realistic and achievable goals that it is possible to *plan* around. On the other hand, aspirations are not the same as expectations. Expectations can be pessimistic. Aspirations, however, are always optimistic, even though balanced by pragmatism and realism.

Apprehensions are defined as potential threats, risks or vulnerabilities; and, in this context, refer to youth fears about what might go wrong.

With respect to education, apprehensions include various events that might lead to dropping out before aspirations are fulfilled. With respect to employment, it might include the situation in the labour market and the chances of getting a desired form of employment. It is possible to theorize about differences in *apprehension levels*, as a combination of (1) the net negative effect it has on an individual's life and (2) the probability that it will take place. For example, being arrested by the police will (1) *effect* an individual by leading to social ostracism, loss of employment, disharmony in family life, etc. and (2) the individual has a certain probability of being arrested.

Control is defined as the ability of an individual to influence certain outcomes; and, in this context, it refers to the control that different groups of youth have over key decisions regarding their future.

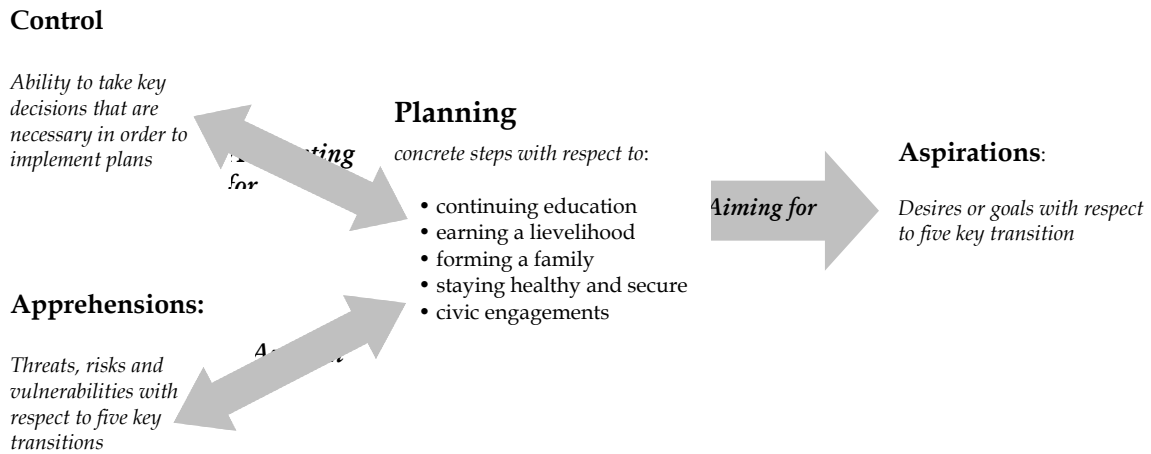
The type of key decisions we are referring to include: the decision of when to discontinue education, the decision of when to marry and who to marry. Control over these decisions might rest with parents or other family members. However, even when parents hold decision making power, youths hold limited control, or a limited ability to influence outcomes. For example, they might try and persuade their parents to take a certain course of action, or they might even choose to disregard their parents' decisions.

Planning refers to intermediate steps taken in pursuit of aspirations; and, in this context, it refers to the concrete steps that different groups of youth are taking or intend to take in the near future.

As a general rule, it is easier to plan over a shorter time horizon than a longer one, as uncertainty increases over time. Higher levels of apprehension also make planning difficult, as too many things could go wrong. Limited control also makes planning difficult, because those who have control might take decisions that disrupt planning.

In trying to explore the active engagements of the youth we focused on the following issues with respect to each key transition: (1) aspirations, (2) apprehensions, (3) control, and (4) planning (see Box for definitions and detailed explanations). In a sense, we are proposing a theoretical model for analyzing how youths go about building their future (see Figure 1). At the heart of the model is *planning*, or the concrete steps that youths take or propose to take in building their future with respect to how far they want to study, what they want to do for a living, etc. The plan is aimed at a set of goals or *aspirations*, the type of future lives that are desired by youths. However, there are apprehensions regarding the future and these transitions – these are the threats or risks that might disrupt plans and lead to their lives falling short of their aspirations. And, further, youths may have limited control over certain key decisions regarding their future which affects their ability to plan.

Figure 1: Planning out the future



This is the broad theoretical framework which informed our consultation meetings. With each of the youth groups we spoke to, we wanted to understand their (1) aspirations, (2) apprehensions, (3) level of control and (4) plans with respect to each of the five key transitions: (1) continuing education, (2) livelihoods, (3) family formation, (4) healthful and secure lifestyles and (5) meaningful citizenship.

II. Methodologies: loosely-structured consultations, instrument-based survey and choosing the youth groups

We wanted to keep the consultation methodology as open-ended as possible – so that we would get youth groups to talk about the subjects we are interested in, without interrupting the natural flow of conversation to any significant degree. The loosely structured consultation methodology was used so that we generated “authentic” voices, rather than simple responses to direct questions, and that we avoid overtly leading youth groups towards the topics of our interest. We, therefore, did not design a semi-structured list of questions. Instead, we designed a checklist, with the explicit idea that we will not follow it in sequence or read out from it, but use it as a reference to ensure that we covered all the major points.

In order to spark conversation, we began with the general question: what do you want your life to be like ten or fifteen years from now? In response to these questions, we expected and we found, that the different groups of youth start talking about some of the pre-identified key transitions – usually, either work, education or family formation. And, if a particular transition theme did not arise in the consultation, the researcher would slide it in with questions like: Do you have any concerns about your health? How would you contribute to your area? How do you view government or politics?

The researcher (one of the four authors) would help focus the discussion on a particular transition issue. We would do so by saying, for example: “she mentioned going to college, lets talk about everyone’s views on education”. While focusing on a particular transition theme, we tried to spark conversation along the four issues – aspirations, apprehensions, control, and plans – though not necessarily in that order. At a very general level, we tried to understand what the different groups of youth aspire for, what are the major perceived threats, how much control do they feel they have, and if they have any plans about how to go about things. When and where possible, we probed further, by asking question such as: Why have they picked a certain aspiration over another? How likely are the threats to materialize? Can they disregard their parents or other powerful people’s decisions in their behalf? How did they come to settle on a particular plan? Quite frequently, we were able to generate debate between youths attending the consultation meetings.

The consultation meetings lasted about one and a half hours to two hours. There were usually three people conducting these consultation meetings. The youth group was usually represented by ten to twelve young men or women. We felt that this was the ideal number, where there would be a diversity of view points and meaningful discussion and debate within the group as well as an opportunity for everyone to speak. We provided basic refreshments – tea, drinks, snacks, etc. – in each of our consultation meetings.

The lead researchers (the authors of the report) led the consultations, and an assistant took down notes. The conversations were also recorded. A short write-up (4 to 6 pages) was produced on each consultation. These write-ups, the tapes, and notes were used in synthesizing the report.

We held a total of twenty-three consultation meetings in four regions of Bangladesh – Rajshahi, Sylhet, Chittagong and Dhaka. In choosing the different youth groups, there were three major objectives: (1) covering the major categories (male/female, educated/uneducated, well-off/poor, rural/urban, etc.), (2) reaching more marginalized, or non-mainstream, youth groups (ethnic and religious minorities, extreme poor, etc.), and (3) talking to potential “change agents” of the future (university students, professionals, foreign-educated youths, etc.). The different youth groups we consulted, and their salient characteristics, are tabulated below.

table 1 : some basic characteristics of the consulted youth groups

Groups	Gender	Age range	Socio-economic status	Education	Marital status	Occupations
I. Dhaka						
1. Kalyanpur <i>basti</i> : working boys	Male	15 to 19	Poor	Primary school	Single	Rickshaw pullers, garments workers, day labourers, unemployed
2. Kalyanpur <i>basti</i> : School-going boys	Male	15 to 20	Poor	Secondary school	Single	-
3. Kalyanpur <i>basti</i> : working girls	Female	15 to 20	Poor	Primary school	Mostly married, some single	Garments work, housework
4. BRAC Head Office: foreign-educated	Male and female mixed	23 to 27	Rich	Foreign-university degrees, some holding or pursuing post-graduate degrees	Single	Professionals in consultancy, NGOs, law firms
5. Junior Chambers Internations: young professional	Male and female mixed	24 to 30	Rich and upper middle class	Local and foreign universities. Some hold post-graduate degrees	Mostly single	Professionals in banking, NGOs, and multinational corporations
6. Jahangirnagar University: politically active students	Male and female mixed	20 to 24	Middle-class to well-off	Currently pursuing Bachelors or Masters degrees	Single	
7. Jahangirnagar University: general students	Male	20 to 24	Middle-class, from rural towns	Currently pursuing Bachelors or Masters degrees	Single	
II Rajshahi						

8. Andorkuta village: Paharia ethnic community girls	Female	12 to 20	Poor	Currently in school, class VIII to X	Single, with one exception	Occasional agricultural labour
9. Mollapara village: Paharia ethnic community boys	Male	15 to 24	Poor to extremely poor	Mostly illiterate, with 2 exceptions	Single	Agricultural day labourers
10. Nachole <i>madrassa</i> students	Male	16 to 17	Poor	Currently in class X	Single	-
11. Nachole BRAC Office: members of BRAC's programme for the extreme poor	Female	15 to 24	Extremely poor	Illiterate, with 2 exceptions	Married	Homestead-based livestock and agriculture, with BRAC assistance
12. Rajshahi University: general students	Male	20 to 24	Middle class	Currently in 1 st or 2 nd year of Bachelor's degree	Single	
III Sylhet						
13. Awai village, Srimangal: BRAC school boys	Male	10 to 14	Poor	Studying in grade 4 or 5	Single	
14. Awai village, Srimangal: young girls	Female	15 to 24	Moderately poor and poor	Some studying for SSC exams, others dropped out already	Mixed married and single	Either in school or in homebased IGA activities
15. Tilakpur Village, Kamalganj: Manipuri ethnic community boys	Male	15 to 20	Well-off	Studying in class IX or X	Single	
16. Tilakpur Village, Kamalgank: Manipuri ethnic community girls	Female	15 to 24	Mostly well-off, some moderately poor	Studying in Classes IX or X or preparing for SSC exams	Single	Some earn extra money by weaving clothes at home
17. South Uttarsur, Srimangal: BRAC school girls	Female	10 to 14	Poor	Studying in Class IV or V	Single	
IV Chittagong						
18. Rangamati, working boys	Male	20 to 22	Poor	Most of them in college, some drop-outs	Single	Driving, shopkeeping or private tutors
19. Rangamati, young women	Female	15 to 21	Poor	Mostly drop-outs, some in Class X or college	Single	Not in income earning
20. Potia upazilla, Chittagong: Hindu young men	Male	20 to 22	Poor	Currently enrolled in College	Single	Private tuition
21. Potia upazilla, Chittagong, Hindu young women	Female	14 to 16	Poor	Currently enrolled in Class IX or Class X	Single	
22. Chakmapara, Rangamati, Chakma young men	Male	14 to 16	Poor	Currently enrolled in Class IX or Class X	Single	
23. Chakmapara, Rangamati, Chakma young women	Female	14 to 16	Poor	Currently enrolled in Class IX or Class X	Single	

There are, of course, many youth groups whom we did not consult with – primarily due to shortages in time. We had to prioritize between groups, choosing the groups that were more interesting, according to our three-fold objectives. However, we would like to point out some omissions that we feel are notable. These are the youth groups that we would have made a point of covering given enough time. We were, in our opinion, least successful in reaching marginalized youth groups. We should have talked to youths living in geographically remote areas, like *chars*; youths engaging in risky behaviour, like drug users; and youths in hazardous occupations, like *bidi* making, sex work, construction work, or “rescued” camel jockeys. There were also some omissions with respect to “potential change agents”. Amongst university students, we spoke to two male groups and one male and female mixed group. Unfortunately, we did not speak to any only female group. Also, we only spoke to current students in the public universities; it would have been interesting to include students currently attending private universities. We were, in spite of these omissions, successful in reaching the most important segments of youths in Bangladesh. We believe that further consultations with these youth groups would add nuance, without challenging, the substance of our report.

The survey was conducted in three of the four study areas – Chittagong, Sylhet and Rajshahi. The survey respondents were the same groups of people with whom we held consultations. The survey was completed at the time we went to invite the youth in question to the consultation meeting. Since not everyone invited came to the consultation meeting, the number of survey respondents exceeds the number of youths who attended a consultation meeting, in these three divisions. Hence, the basic profile of the survey respondents corresponds quite closely with the profiles of the youths with whom we held consultations. The basic profile of the survey respondents is tabulated below

table 2 : basic profile of survey respondents

Division	Rajshahi	26.0%
	Sylhet	41.0%
	Chittagong	33.0%
Gender	Male	47.6%
	Female	52.4%
Age	Range	10 to 25
	Mean	17.7
Ethnic background	Bengali	63.9%
	Indigenous	36.1%
Location	Town	30.8%
	Village	69.2%
Self-reported economic status	Always deficit	7.1%
	Sometimes deficit	34.8%
	Sufficient	29.0%
	Always surplus	29.0%
Marital Status	Unmarried	79.1%
	Married	19.1%
	Divorced/abandoned/widowed	1.8%
Current enrolment	Attending	67.6%
	Not attending	32.4%
Educational status	Uneducated	6.2%
	Primary	26.7%
	Secondary	45.8%
	College/university	21.3%
Employed/occupied	Occupied	33.0%
	Not Occupied	67.0%
Occupation, for those occupied	Regular employment	14.7%
	Business	33.3%
	Agricultural labour	6.7%
	Day labourer	8.0%
	Agro-based self-employment	30.6%
	Others	6.6%
NGO Affiliation	Affiliated	21.1%
	Not Affiliated	78.9%

As the table demonstrates, our respondents comprised of roughly the same number of men and women; a third of our respondents were from indigenous communities; almost 70% lived in villages; a small number of our respondents were chronic poor (7.1%) and the single largest chunk were occasional poor (34.8%); most of our respondents (79.1%) were unmarried; about two-thirds were currently enrolled in school and about a third were working; almost half were educated up to the primary level and only about 6% were uneducated; of those working, two-thirds were in business or

agro-based self-employment and only about 15% were employed in regular salaried jobs; and a fifth of our respondents were affiliated with NGOs.

III. The voices of the youth

Generally, the different groups of youth appeared to have a sense of purpose, a sense of direction, and a multiplicity of plans about how to achieve their larger goals. Our preliminary assumption that the youth are agents, actively planning and pursuing their goals, was borne out by our consultations. As our discussion in this section will convey, different groups of youth – male or female, poor or rich, rural or urban, educated or uneducated, indigenous minority or majority Bengali – have clear and well-defined aspirations that provides them with a sense of purpose and, generally, a multiplicity of plans about how to achieve their purpose, that gives them a sense of direction.

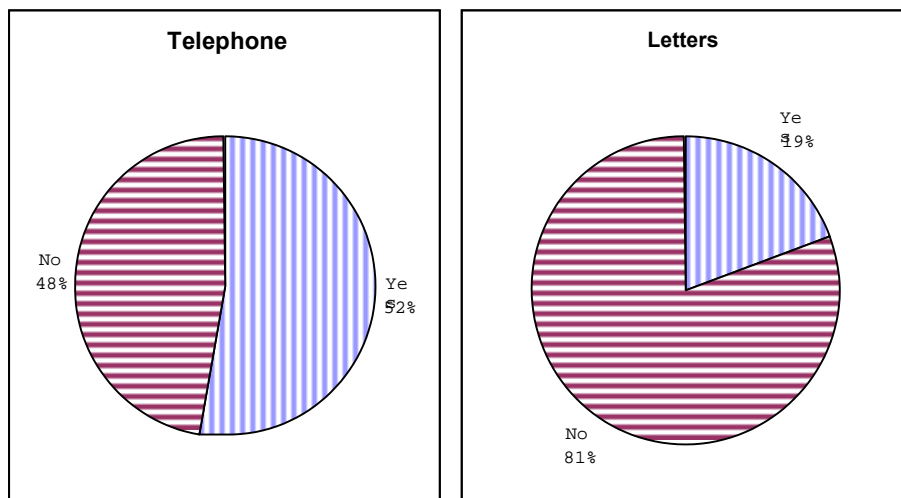
However, the general sense of purpose and directions does not imply that the youth were overly optimistic. They were, in fact, keenly aware of the sizable obstacles they faced in implementing their plans and achieving their aspirations. They were conscious of the limitations they had in taking decisions and achieving goals. However, there was a sense of being able to work with and around limitations and risks. On balance, we would say that the youth groups we spoke to are practical, pragmatic, and goal-oriented.

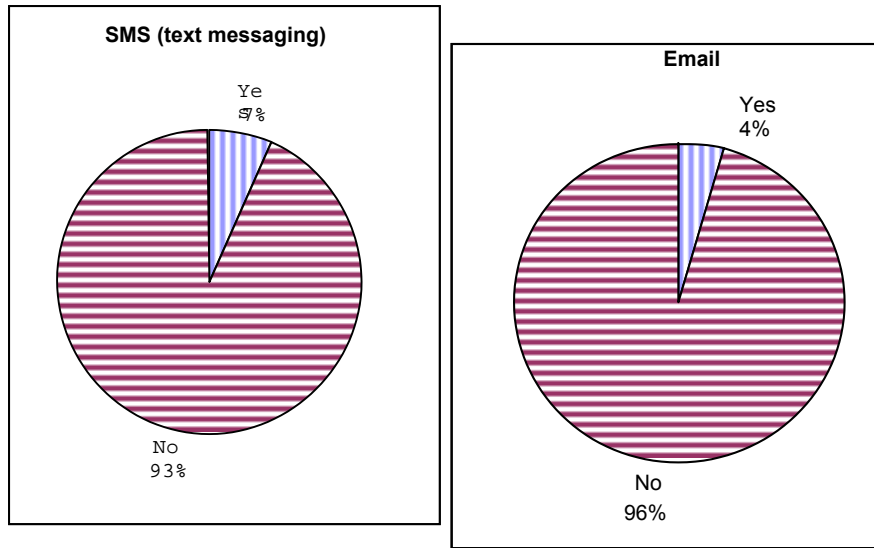
There was, however, one exception from all our consultations. A Paharia woman in Rajshahi, who has dropped out of schooling and is married, does not see much of a future for herself. Her aspirations for the future centre on her children.

Interestingly, with regards to aspiration formations, it needs to be mentioned that most youths do not communication much with the outside world, beyond their division – whether it is Rajshahi, Sylhet, or Chittagong. As Figure 2 below demonstrates, youths are most likely to communicate outside through phone, and are not so likely to communicate through other modern communication technologies – like email or SMS.

In the subsequent sections of this report, we shall discuss the aspirations, apprehensions and plans with respect to continuing education, livelihoods, family formation, health and security and civic engagements as described by these various youth groups. Before we go into each of the key transitions individually and in detail, we want to talk about the larger or broader aspirations held by different groups of youth. In other words, what the youths describe as the major goals in their lives.

Figure 2: How youths communicate with the outside world





IV. Overarching aspirations

The phrase that recurred quite frequently in our consultations was “*nijer paye darano*” – in other words, “standing on one’s own feet”. This phrase refers to economic independence – not having to depend on parents or other family members for livelihoods. *Nijer paye darano* is basically about building a secure and sustainable livelihood in order to maintain a certain standard of living, a standard which varied according to socio-economic status and education.

Concretely, “*nijer paye darano*” meant different things to different people: for young working boys in the Kalyanpur *basti*, it referred to having the financial resources to marry and raise children as well as look after aging parents. For university students in Jahangirnagar and Rajshahi University, it meant finding salaried employment. *Nijer paye darano* was also important to women. Manipuri women in Sylhet told us, that women need an income for – if nothing else – to be able to support their everyday needs without depending on husbands or fathers. As the working women in Kalyanpur told us, it is not possible to maintain a family on only one person’s income. Additionally, as one of the women told us, “it is not good to be dependent on your husband, you have to be able to look after yourself”.

For a group of rural young women in Sylhet, however, the major aspiration was to get married well – to a man who has “established” himself in life. This group was the only one that viewed marriage and family formation as their major aspirations. However, in our conversation with various groups of women, we were told how “other” women just want to get married and depend on their husbands for all their needs. Such women were viewed as inferior. Dependency, even on a husband was not desirable because it would lead to marital conflicts and women would not know what to do if their husbands left them. It is for these reasons that most groups of young women held a similar overarching aspiration of *nijer paye darano*.

In many ways, *nijer paye darano* provides the baseline aspiration – the minimum that needs to be achieved. For the poor and uneducated youths, this in itself can be a considerable struggle. The better-off and educated youth groups, however, aspired for something greater than only economic independence. Young, educated men – who are either in school or university – made a point of how they want to acquire social status through education and salaried jobs; in their words, by becoming an “officer”. This is going above and beyond *nijer paye darano* and, at a very substantive level, seems to be about doing better than one’s parents. The clearest manifestation of this is from youths from a rural background and their disdain for agricultural work. As the *madrassa* students in Rajshahi told us,

“We do not want to be like our parents. We cannot work in the fields. That would be disgraceful and shameful. We want to be in a better profession than them.” Other groups of youth spoke of taking advantage of the opportunities that their parents never had. As one of the school-going boys in Kalyanpur *basti* put it: “our parents never got the opportunities we have, it is up to us to make the most of it and achieve, and to make sure we can look after our parents in their old age.”

The ethnic minority groups, interestingly especially female groups, wanted to “make their community proud” by getting a post-graduate degree and starting a professional career. This was especially important to the Paharia women in Rajshahi. There are no members of their community who have gone on to higher education and they spoke of indigenous men and women in Rajshahi University as sources of inspiration. By being successful members of a minority and marginalized community, they hoped to become role models themselves. Similarly, Manipuris in Sylhet had higher educational aspirations than the Bengalis. As Manipuri women told us, “if we had the economic means, we would like to obtain Master’s degrees so that we can get good teaching jobs.”

Politically active students in Jahangirnagar University were by and large left-leaning. Interestingly, members of the student wing of either of the two major parties shared similar left-wing beliefs as members of the smaller leftist student parties. This, we were informed by several Jahangirnagar graduates, is a peculiar feature of that university. These students have strong views on the negative impacts of globalization and capitalism, and describe these forces as imperialistic. They are very disturbed about the impact of these “imperialistic” forces on the culture and economy of Bangladesh. These students wanted to play a role in preserving and promoting Bangladeshi culture from the “threat of global capitalism”. They were also concerned about the growing focus on urban Bangladesh and felt that rural, traditional Bangladeshi culture was being rapidly eroded. Some of them spoke of getting job as a teacher in a village school so that they can give back to rural parts of the country. They even spoke, admittedly in a rather idyllic sense, of starting a utopian revolution.

The young professionals of the Junior Chambers International (JCI) were focused on professional success. They aspired towards successful, dynamic and rapidly rising careers. The foreign-educated group was more focused on, as they put it, the “why” of their lives. They were looking to make larger changes in the social and political climate of the country. For example, a young lawyer spoke of his desire to help in establishing the “rule of law” in Bangladesh. Above and beyond economic security, which is not a concern for them, and professional success, which they seem to take for granted, this group was focused on bringing about large-scale changes in Bangladesh.

These “overarching aspirations” inform the more specific aspirations held by different youth groups with respect to the five key transitions. In a sense, the more specific plans and goals with respect to those transitions are defined by these “overarching aspirations”. Many of the threats and apprehensions expressed by the youth groups are also expressed in relation to those key transitions. In other words, in order to make sense of youth perspectives on these transitions, it is necessary to read them in the context of these overarching aspirations.

V. Transition to continuing education

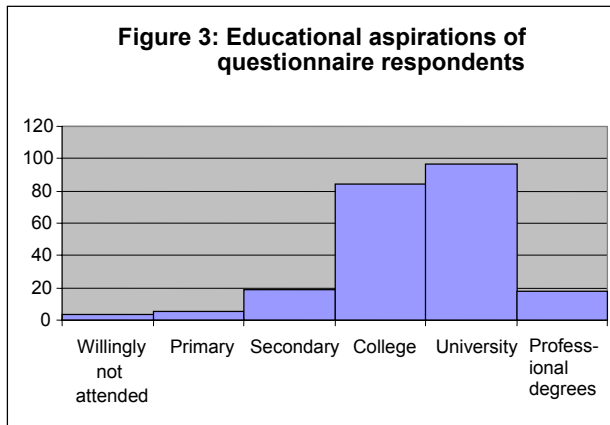
The educational status of the groups we consulted varied considerably. Out of twenty-three consultation meetings, 11 were with youth groups who were still in school, 3 were with youth groups currently in university, 2 were with youth groups who had completed university education or were in post-graduate education, and 7 were with youth groups who had dropped out before completing secondary education. Understandably, different youth groups in different levels of education had rather different notions of the transition to education.

In this section, we shall firstly discuss educational aspirations of different groups of youth and try to understand their reasons for aspiring to a certain level of education. We shall then discuss the major

threats or apprehensions regarding transitions to continuing education. We shall then discuss the level of control different groups of youth are able to exercise over their education. We will conclude the section by discussing youth planning and the difficulties of planning.

V.A. Educational aspirations

Interestingly, there was considerable agreement as to how much education the youths would have liked to receive, given the opportunity – they would have liked to have gone on to a college or university degree. The distribution of responses to this very question from our sample survey is illustrated in Figure 2. Interestingly, most of those who are not even currently enrolled in any educational institution said that they would have preferred to go on to university education, if they had the opportunity.



Clearly, however, it is not entirely practical for those who are not currently enrolled in educational institutions to aspire to post-secondary education. These are not so much aspirations, as wishful thoughts or ideal world scenarios. As the consultation meetings showed, most youths who have already dropped out do not intend to return to the educational system. Generally, these youths recognize

that their chances of continuing education are over. However, illiterate groups told us that they would join adult literacy programmes if they had the opportunity. On the other hand, youths currently in the education system tend to aspire to Master’s degrees. An exception to this rule was a group of rural young women in Sylhet, who aspired up to secondary schooling. They do not feel the need for any more education as secondary degrees is enough to get a teaching job. Students already in university aspire towards obtaining more and different types of degrees. For example, physics students at Jahangirnagar University aspired to complete an MBA through evening courses after obtaining their MSc degree in Physics. The young professional group also aspires to return to education at a later point in their career – probably to get a professional degree. There is also a strong aspiration to go abroad for a foreign-degree. Jahangirnagar University students spoke of time spent on the internet applying for scholarships and fellowships that are simply too competitive for them.

The survey data shows that the differences between aspiration groups are primarily due to gender. Those whose aspirations fall below the college level are almost entirely female: of the 19 youths who want to stop at secondary schooling, 16 are female. On the other hand, of the 18 youths who want to go beyond university education, 17 are male. Also, males are more likely to aspire to university education rather than stopping at college education: 52% of males aspire to university education while 27% aspire to just a college degree. It is the reverse for women: 34% of women aspire up to university, while 46% aspire only up to a college degree.

Interestingly, poverty does not seem to make so much of an impact on educational aspirations. Almost 80% of the youth who reported that their households are either always in deficit or occasionally in deficit aspire to college or higher education; in fact, 7 of the 18 youth aspiring to post-graduate studies are from that group. Also, proportionately poor people aspire to university education, rather than stopping at college education (43% aspire to university education, and 31% to

college education). Another interesting finding is that ethnic minorities are more likely to aspire to university education, rather than stopping at college education, confirming our impression from the consultations that ethnic youths place a higher emphasis on education: 55% of ethnic minorities aspire to university education against the 36% who aspire up to primary level.

In terms of the type of education aspired towards, the aspiration is for mainstream education, rather than vocational education. Most groups of youth, however, recognized the value of vocational education. However, in spite of recognizing the value of vocational education, the youth groups already in school clearly aspired towards university degrees. There is a distinction between vocational education, which is geared towards self-employment, and formal higher education, which is geared towards salaried employment. As the youth in Sylhet told us, vocational training creates opportunities for self-employment which leads to greater income and freedom but formal education and salaried employment are more respected and, therefore, more desirable. Employers do not recognize vocational degrees and a vocational degree does not bring the desired social status. The school-going boys in Kalyanpur *basti* recommended combining vocational training with SSCs.

The value of a vocational degree was most clearly felt by youths who had dropped out of the education system, and many of them felt that it would be good to have more vocational training institutes. Kalyanpur *basti* working boys told us about how young men could learn driving while working as a “helper” or “conductor” on buses and “maxis” – jeeps that carry 10 to 12 passengers around Dhaka, or learn electric or mechanical repairs by working in shops as helpers and, thus, learning how to do those repairs themselves. Kalyanpur *basti* working women told us about tailoring skills they had acquired by working in garments factories. These groups felt that vocational training institutes would open opportunities for more young men and women to learn skills that would help them earn a living. Paharia men in Rajshahi, who were mostly illiterate, also said that vocational education would have been desirable, and they bemoaned the lack of a vocational training institute in their neighbourhood. Urban Bengali males in Rangamati also bemoaned the fact that there were limited seats in the government run vocational training institutes, and that these were generally reserved for ethnic minority groups, to the exclusion of Bengalis.

For those aspiring to post-secondary education, the subject of study and the type of degree are important aspirations. Jahangirnagar University students told us that it is only students in three subjects who have good employment prospects – business, pharmacy, and computer science. Most applicants to the university would like to study these subjects but, due to limited numbers of seats, they are forced to study other subjects. The majority of the Rajshahi University students we spoke to were in the Commerce Faculty, which was their first choice. They were happy with their subject as they felt they had better employment opportunities. The young professionals of the JCI told us that a degree from the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) is the most desirable – because no one will turn you down for a job if you graduate from there. Foreign-educated youths were confident that their western-degrees guaranteed them with jobs in Bangladesh, if not anywhere in the world they choose to live. By and large, the choice of subject is influenced by their perceived chances of employment in private sector commercial firms.

Interestingly, students currently in primary or secondary schools felt that professional education – medical and engineering degrees – are the most desirable. Primary school boys in Sylhet and *madrassa* students in Rajshahi were aspiring to becoming engineers and doctors. There are two possible explanations for this difference in educational aspirations between school students and university students: (1) the school students are more optimistic regarding their chances of getting a place in one of the limited numbers of medical or engineering schools, and (2) the school students are not as keenly aware of the types of degrees currently in demand in the job market. Interestingly, the foreign-educated students had a debate amongst themselves about a professional education (law, in this case) versus a liberal arts oriented general education. Those debating for a professional

education said that they will have specific skills that are always in demand, whereas the general education crowd spoke of their increased flexibility.

The aspired type and extent of continuing education is very closely linked to aspirations in terms of livelihoods. The youths in Chittagong aspire to a Master's education so that they can get a good government job; however, if they do not get a government job, they can get a teaching job. As the working women in Kalyanpur *basti* put it, "we are almost uneducated, we can't do the type of work you do. We will get, at the most 3,000 taka a month working. We will never get 10,000 taka a month. For those types of jobs, you have to be educated." This is also borne out by the survey data, where we find that 82% of the people who believe that a college education is necessary for a good job aspire to a college degree, and 79% of the people who believe that a university education is necessary for a good job aspire to a university degree. The subjects of study that are more desirable are also related to employment prospects – hence, physics students at Jahangirnagar wish to do an MBA through evening classes. Youths who have dropped out of education, therefore, desire vocational training, as that it is a second-best alternative in terms of employment prospects. This also explains why some young women groups, particularly rural women in Sylhet, have lower educational aspirations, because their overarching aspiration is not in terms of the transition to work, but in terms of the transition to family formations.

Education also provides social status, and this was considered important by many of the groups. As working boys in Dhaka told us, "you guys are educated, people take you seriously. If you are not educated, no one pays attention to you." The social status also translates into certain kinds of work or occupation being beneath people – especially agricultural work and manual labour. It is also interesting that youths aspire to do better than their parents. In all the youth groups in all regions, those who were continuing education aspired to complete a post-graduate degree, even though none of them had parents who had completed even a Bachelor's degree.

For certain ethnic communities, education and literacy provides security against being cheated. Ethnic communities in Rajshahi have had experiences of being conned by educated Bengalis into signing away – with a thumbprint – titles to their land, because they could not read. These communities value education as protection against being cheated. As mentioned earlier, they also value education as a means to "making their communities proud." It is interesting that the minority groups in Sylhet had higher educational aspirations than the Bengalis there.

V.B. Apprehensions regarding education: the threat of dropping out

The risk in terms of continuing education is dropping out of the schooling system before completing the aspired or desired level of education. Of the groups we spoke to, some had already dropped out, and a number of other groups – particularly at the school level – were concerned about having to drop out before completing their aspired level of education. One of the major periods during which youths drop out of education is after completing primary education. Both young boys and girls and Kalyanpur *basti* had dropped out after completing primary education and during the first few years of secondary schooling. There is also a group of students who do not go on from secondary education to university education. Current university students also spoke of difficulties or obstacles in continuing on to post-graduate education

According to the youth groups, poverty is *the* major cause behind why some youths drop out after completing primary education. The youth groups told us about how the costs of education rise abruptly between the primary and secondary levels. Also, young people can start working and earning money for their families during this period, hence increasing the temptation for parents to send their children to work. In fact, even students currently enrolled in secondary school occasionally take days off from school to work. At the same time, young people from wealthier backgrounds are not at all concerned about successfully completing secondary schooling. The group

of primary school students in Sylhet, who were from better off backgrounds, were confident of their chances of continuing their education through to professional degrees in medicine or engineering.

There are also problems with the availability of schools in Sylhet. The Manipuri girls in Sylhet told us that schools are very far away and there are simply not enough schools. Several other groups in Sylhet told us that roads need to be repaired so that they can make it to school. On the other hand, in Chittagong, there are problems with keeping a schools open and teachers in attendance, because of frequent ethnic minority/Bengali conflicts.

Another major reason for young women dropping out of school is early marriage. Girls get married in their teens, while they are supposed to be enrolled in school. Marriage, generally, spells the end of education. Amongst the Manipuri community in Sylhet, however, girls get married later and are, therefore, more confident that they will continue their education. However, amongst the Kalyanpur *basti* girls, they drop out of school to work – in garments factories or as domestic servants – before they get married. Hence, it is the transition to work rather than the transition to marriage that interrupts their transitions to continuing education.

There is, as we discussed earlier, recognition of the value of education. However, the group of Paharia young men in Rajshahi spoke about their communities not understanding the value of education and pulling their children out of the education system. Other youth groups spoke about the uncertainty that education will be sufficient in providing employment – because the labour market is corrupt and employment is secured through bribes or personal networks. Hence, once the opportunity costs of continuing education become clear, many young men and women are pulled out of the education system. The extreme poor women in Nachole told us, “even if schooling is free and we have to pay the examination fee, we would not be able to sit for the exams. If you do not get the degree, there is no point in going to school.” Also, in Chittagong, once a boy turns 16 or 17 he can make 100 taka a day. Hence, rather than sending them to school, parents prefer to make them work.

Another perceived reason for a failure to transition to continuing education is “mixing with bad boys”. These groups of young men do not study and develop bad habits. They take drugs, watch pornography and become petty criminals. Hence, they lose interests in their studies. One of the boys in the Kalyanpur *basti* group, a self-proclaimed “bad boy”, told us about how he dropped out of school at the secondary level: “the teacher beat me once. So I waited for school to end and when the teacher left the school building I beat him up worse. I haven’t gone back to school since then.”

The transition to university education is also a difficulty. The youths recognize that you have to be “good in your studies” in order to continue on to university education. Further, economic means is also perceived by the youth groups as important in determining who goes on to university education. However, some groups, notably in Chittagong, told us that a large number of youths start working immediately after completing secondary education, because they are not confident about employment prospects for university-educated youths.

For students currently in universities, the major threat is delays in getting their degrees – “session jams” – and, broadly, the poor governance of public universities. Rajshahi University students told us about session jams, politicization of the teachers and the student body, and even corruption and favouritism in the university. Jahangirnagar University students, on the other hand, were reasonably satisfied with their universities. However, all groups of students see limited opportunities in terms of continuing education. They cannot depend on their parents to fund their education any further and, hence, in the future they need scholarships or to be able to combine earning money with obtaining degrees. In order to get scholarships, the students need exceptional grades which few of them have achieved.

V.C. Planning in the context of limited control

The major difficulty that young people have in planning their transitions to continuing education is that their parents or family members have control over their education. The parents hold the purse-strings and decide whether or not to support their education and their needs. If the finances are cut-off, the youths cannot continue with their education. For young women, continuing education is also affected by parental control over the decision of when to marry. If parents or other family members decide it is time for the children to get married, that spells the end of their education. On the other hand, for youths who have already dropped out of the education system before completing secondary schooling, there are no real plans to continue their education. 75% of respondents to our survey told us that their families have major influence over decisions regarding their education.

The policy demand from a lot of youth groups is for more flexible schools, that allows young people to combine work and studies. Kalyanpur *basti* working boys voiced this demand quite strongly: “if we could go to school in the evenings, or for a few hours in the middle of the day, we could pull rickshaws during part of the day, and go to school for the rest. We cannot be in school the whole day, we need to earn money”. In order to return to education, uneducated or primary school drop outs spoke of a combination of flexible education and vocational training. Even university students spoke of the difficulties in getting part-time work, so they can earn money while they study. Jahangirnagar and Rajshahi University students spoke of the possibilities of private tuition and other kinds of part-time work, which they hear is possible for western university students. Rajshahi University students also spoke of possibility of student loans that would be repaid after graduation and starting work.

Young professionals do plan on leaving their jobs and pursuing higher degrees in foreign universities – generally MBAs or post-graduate studies in their respective subject areas. They plan on working and building up their credentials, so that they can make strong applications for admission and funding into reputed foreign universities. However, one of the members of the JCI told us that employers provide a lot of opportunities for on the job training and discourage employees from leaving their jobs to get an MBA. Jahangirnagar University students spoke of doing evening classes for MBAs, in addition to full time employment, after graduating. They were applying for scholarships to study in the west, though they felt that their chances of getting a scholarship were slim. They recommended that the government should create more scholarship opportunities for Bangladeshi students desiring to study abroad.

VI. Transition to sustainable livelihoods

Nijer paye darano – or economic independence – is basically about building a sustainable livelihood. This was the overarching aim of many of our respondents. As was the case with continuing education, the youth groups represented various stages in the transition to work. Nine of the groups were already working in some capacity. The rest were still in school or in university. However, even amongst those already working, their aspirations were not limited to their current type of work – they all aspired to bigger and better things in terms of their diverse livelihood strategies. Also, in our survey we found that most of the youths already working are very optimistic about their futures: 77% of the youth respondents currently working felt that in five years they will be doing better than they are now.

VI.A. Aspirations in terms of desired livelihoods: salaried employment or entrepreneurship

The transition to sustainable livelihoods also incorporates some higher aspirations, like doing better than one’s parents, achieving professional success, or making a difference to the larger world. The

desire to do better than one's parents was most frequently expressed by a disdain for agricultural work is one manifestation of this desire to do better than their parents. This aspiration is not, however, limited to agricultural work: as a group of young boys in Sylhet told us, "we do not want to do the same things as our fathers. They were mostly in farming, they were school teachers, they were government clerks or technical staff. We want to be doctors or engineers".

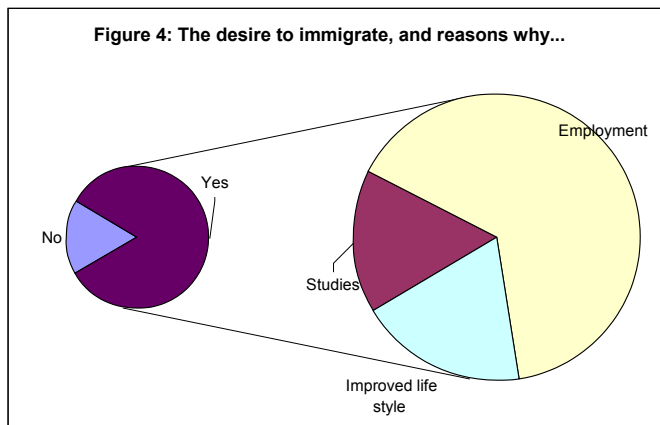
For certain groups, there is also a strong aspiration towards professional success, most notably members of the JCI. Young *madrasa* students in Rajshahi expressed a similar aspiration towards working with "integrity and honesty, unlike today's doctors, teachers or government employees." This sense that doing well professionally was a way in which young men could contribute to the country was also shared by other groups. The foreign-educated group of youths expressed this as a central plank of their aspirations – through their work they want to bring about large-scale changes in Bangladesh.

Educated young men and women commonly aspired to salaried employment. The civil service – or public sector – employment is a primary aspiration for most educated, rural youths. All the youth groups we spoke to in Chittagong aspired to government service. "Doctors and engineers" – or professionals – is another aspired to career, especially for young men; for example young school going boys in Sylhet quoted above. Some of the educated youth groups aspired to private sector employment. For example, the non-political students in Jahangirnagar University spoke of ideally working in the banking sector, or other segments of the private sector. However, they all intend to sit for the civil service entrance examinations, though that is more of a back up option in case they fail to get a job in the private sector. Young women currently in school have slightly different aspirations with respect to salaried employment. Many of them aspire to teach or to work in NGOs.

For uneducated groups, the livelihood aspirations are considerably different. They recognize that their opportunities in terms of salaried employment are limited. Rural women in Sylhet want to get teaching jobs that are based in their communities; the men in the same region, on the other hand, want to move into cities in order to get government jobs or other forms of salaried employment. Another possible option, that Chittagongians and Sylhetis both spoke of very favourable, is employment in the army. On the other hand, for urban men and women, working in garments factories or as domestic servants seems to offer the best opportunities in terms of salaried employment. However, these options are perceived to be dead-end options. The Kalyanpur *basti* working boys told us that they do not like garments work because the supervisors mistreat and insult the workers. The people who do well in that line of work are those who can withstand these humiliations. The working girls in Kalyanpur *basti* told us that their futures in garments work is limited and they will never be able to rise above a certain post and a maximum of 2,500 taka a month in wages.

On the other hand, self-employment or entrepreneurship offered much more opportunities for growth and mobility. The men spoke of various options in terms of self-employment – small scale poultry factory, setting up a small corner shop for general supplies, or even a tea-betel leaf-cigarette stall. The girls spoke of running businesses from their homes and offered various ideas, like tailoring outfits, cosmetics shop, etc. There was considerable optimism and quite high aspirations amongst both groups of men and women. They felt that they could keep plowing back their profits into their businesses and let their capital (*puji*) grow. There were no limits to their potential success, unlike in salaried employment where they would never be able to do as well as an educated person. As one of the boys told us "I do not want to be a *babshahi* (Bengali word for businessman, implying small businessman), I want to be a *bijnizman* (the English word, implying large-scale business). Self-employment was also the preferred option for extremely poor women in Nachole, Rajshahi. These women had received – as a grant – some livestock from BRAC. Their future aspirations was surrounding these livestock, increasing and diversifying the number and type of animals they have and, hence, earning more money.

Interestingly, the non-poor, educated groups had a very positive perception about self-employment and entrepreneurship and they said that self-employment is a good option if possible. This positive perception is captured by our survey data: 93% of respondents reported being interested in self-employment and 97% viewed self employment positively. They spoke positively about the independence of being your own boss, about not having to go door to door begging for a job, and the satisfaction of working for oneself. In spite of these positives, however, these youth groups were more interested in respected salaried employment. Partly, this reflects the risks and difficulties in entrepreneurship. As will be discussed in greater detail below, lack of access to capital means that start-up enterprises will most likely be small in scale. Small-scale trading or business does not come with the type of social status associated with formal sector employment. For example, Manipuri women in Sylhet told us: “boys should get salaried employment, because salaried jobs make a boy more desirable as would-be husbands”. Hence, in spite of expressing an interest in self-employment and a respect for self-employment, it is still considered a second-best choice to salaried employment by educated youths from better socio-economic backgrounds.



There was also an aspiration to go abroad to work. The groups in Rajshahi were all keen to go abroad, include the Paharia women in Rajshahi. Similarly, the groups in Sylhet are also keen to go abroad. However, the young people in Chittagong do not want to leave their area. They are, however, not so confident about being able to go abroad. *Madrassa* students thought that we (the

researchers) would create opportunities for them to go abroad. However, several women’s groups are more apprehensive about going abroad. For example, rural women in Sylhet feel that being abroad will make them “bad.”

VI.B. Apprehensions: state of the labour market and the difficulties of entrepreneurship

The major apprehension of young, educated youth is that they will not find the type of work they are looking for. In fact, in the perspective of most youth, there are simply not enough jobs to fulfill the needs of educated young men. Unemployment – or *bekarotto* – is a very real possibility for most of these young men and women. A Jahangirnagar physics student gave us his impression of how tight the labour market is: “say that there is a post asking for simple BA pass. There will be at least one thousand applicants to that post and all of them will have a Masters degree. And a lot of them will also have a PhD.”

The tight labour market is also a highly corrupt labour market. In the perceptions of the youth, a well-placed bribe is likely to result in a job, rather than excellent credentials and a good academic background. In fact, all the youth groups, with the exception of the JCI and the foreign-educated group, commented on corruption in the labour market and many of them said that they will pay a bribe in order to get a job. In youth perceptions, public sector jobs could be only gotten through bribery. The youths also perceive the labour market to be highly nepotistic: only those individuals with well connected uncles (*chacha-mama*) got jobs. Interestingly, political connections were also perceived to help in getting jobs. Rajshahi University students told us that politically involved

students would get jobs more easily than they would. The value of education in getting a job is, therefore, leads to an undervaluation of education. As Rajshahi University students told us, “a few brilliant students, who were top of their class and cannot be ignored, will get jobs because of their academic credentials. The rest get jobs through bribes or a *mama*. If we have to pay a bribe to get a job, we will do so. We won’t have a choice in the matter.” Also, Bengali youths in Rangamati feel like “third-class” citizens, because they feel that the ethnic groups in the hill tracts get preference for jobs over them.

Interestingly, however, we spoke to members of the JCI many of whom now sit on interview boards. They told us that the sheer incompetence of most applicants is shocking. Interviewees become nervous, they seize up and are unable to talk. Applicants in masters in chemistry cannot answer basic questions like “what is an organic compound?” According to the JCI members, anyone who is competent, can speak decent English, and is not cowed down by nervousness can get a job. In their perception, there are lots of opportunities in Bangladesh and not enough people to take these opportunities. The JCI members are confident in themselves that they will never be rejected for a job. Several of them were graduates of IBA – the elite business administration school – and they said that IBA graduates have no shortage of employment opportunities.

The major obstacle to starting a business is a lack of capital and access to capital. The Kalyanpur *basti* boys told us that there are no shortages of business opportunities and that, if they had the capital, they could start a business overnight. There were primarily two business opportunities they spoke of – opening a small shop, or starting a small poultry farm. For the latter business, they would also need – in addition to startup capital – training and guidance. The Kalyanpur *basti* girls, similarly, told us that – with capital – they could start a home-based business, such as tailoring. They would not need any skill development for tailoring, as many of them had gained skills while working at garments factories.

For these groups, the major obstacle to starting a business is a lack of capital. In fact, the lack of capital was identified as the major obstacle by most groups across the country. For example, young men in urban Rangamati liked the idea of entrepreneurship but, because the startup capital was so difficult to obtain, they preferred salaried employment. There were also other problems with entrepreneurship. The lack of a positive and secure business environment was pointed out by several groups – notably, urban males in Rangamati and Rajshahi University students. The primary concern in Rangamati was about insecurity of their businesses from robberies, thefts, or politically motivated violence. In Rajshahi, the primary threat was politics – the university students felt that unless the youths were politically connected, it would be difficult to maintain a business. They also spoke of bureaucratic hassles in setting up a business. The male youth groups in Sylhet also said that it will be difficult to start a business because they will not get family support for business schemes, except as a last option. However, by and large, the main obstacle was the lack of capital.

It should, however, be mentioned that there is no clear notion of how much money is enough money. It obviously varies according to the desired type and scale of enterprises. For example, women looking to setup home based tailoring or livestock related enterprises, the start-up cost is quite low. For young men in Kalyanpur aspiring to start up a shop, the costs are relatively higher – they have to make a down payment to lease the store and they need a decent amount of working capital. As one of the boys put it to us, “we could start a shop with 20,000 taka, but that is not going to grow very fast. Better yet, we spend 50,000 taka and start in a bigger way. Then your profits flow in faster and you can expand quicker.” For the educated and better-off youths, they want an even larger amount of capital so that they can start a “decent business” rather than being a small trader.

VI.C. Planning, in the face of threats

Whereas transitions to education were problematic for the youth to engage with because of a lack of control, the same constraints do not seem to be at work with regard to employment. None of the groups we spoke to mentioned parental or familial control over their decisions regarding livelihood sources. In Chittagong, the urban male youth groups said that their parents cannot support them financially, so they will not pay much heed to their parents' desires. The major factors that youths take into consideration in planning their transition to sustainable livelihoods are: (1) a tight labour market, that is characterized by corruption, nepotism and politicization and (2) lack of access to capital and an unfavourable investment climate for would-be entrepreneurs. The different youth groups have several plans to overcome these constraints.

One of the strategies to overcome a tight labour market is to gather degrees – more and more degrees – from different sources. Young men and women in Sylhet said that the only way to plan a successful career is through continuing education. This strategy was most clearly articulated by the students at Jahangirnagar University. After completing a master's degree at Jahangirnagar, many of them plan to take evening courses to obtain an MBA degree. Some of them aspire to go abroad on scholarship to study. They feel that they need more degrees to differentiate themselves from their competition. Rajshahi University students spoke about building proper connections and they said that would pay a bribe, if necessary. One of them even said that for his dowry, he would like his would-be father-in-law to pay a bribe necessary to get him a job. The younger youth groups we spoke to are vague in their planning. Their immediate goal is to get into university, in order to obtain salaried employment.

The youth groups who are aspiring to start a business have several plans for obtaining capital. A few of the working boys in Kalyanpur *basti* are planning to start an informal savings association. There are a few other such savings associations in the slum already. The boys think that they can save up enough money in 2 years to start a poultry business. They would, however, need technical help and guidance. The working girls in the *basti*, on the other hand, hope for an NGO loan that will provide the start-up cash for a small-scale, home-based business venture. There were no real plans of these would-be entrepreneurs with respect to insecurity or political risks.

VII. Transition to family formation

The male youth groups we consulted were entirely single. Of the female groups, the poorer women were married: the working women in Kalyanpur *basti*, and the extreme poor women in Rajshahi were married. The remaining groups, who are still in school, are single. Discussions of the transition to family formation turned around the question of marriage; most importantly, questions like who to marry, and when to marry. There was also a lot of discussion on the ideal partner – both male and female – and perceptions of happy conjugal life. There was some discussion on how many children, and of which gender, would be ideal.

VII.A. Aspirations: when to marry and who to marry?

There was broad agreement that the ideal time to marry was once you were “established in life”; in other words, once they were able to “stand on their own feet”. As an aspiration, this was generally true for both men and women, though women were more uncertain of their ability to do so. In Sylhet, however, it was felt that it was not so important for women to become established; rather, women should get married once their education has come to a stop. For example, rural young women in Sylhet who aspired to get married after they completed their secondary education. As discussed earlier, young women in other groups spoke rather disparagingly of “those women whose only goal in life is to get married.” However, even these women were not certain that they will be able to delay marriage till they get established.

About the right age to get married, it was commonly agreed that women should get married earlier than men. This is probably because it is considered more important for the man to become “established” before marriage. There were, however, a few exceptions to this. For example, young professional members of the JCI, foreign-educated youths and, interestingly, Hindu young women in Chittagong, thought that men and women should get married at the same age. This social norm creates difficulties for Jahangirnagar University male and female students who would like to marry their girlfriends/boyfriends who are roughly the same age as them. However, Jahangirnagar male students told us, rather pragmatically, that they might not be able to marry their girlfriends because they are under pressure to get married soon after graduating. At that stage, if they are “not established”, they will marry later and, probably, according to their parents’ choice.

There was also broad consensus on the appropriate age to get married. All of the groups recognize that early marriage is a social evil, and most groups set the ideal age for marriage much higher than the minimum age of 18. For example, the male and female youth groups in Chittagong, with the exception of young, Hindu women, were in agreement that a good age for girls to get married is 20 to 25, while for boys it is 25 to 30. Similarly, Rajshahi University male students, on the other hand, feel that 22 or 23 is a good age for girls, while 30 is a good age for men. Further, they said that too great of an age difference is can bring “misunderstanding and unhappiness in marriage.” The group of young rural women in Sylhet, who aspire primarily towards a happy marriage, set the age limits lower – “girls should marry at 18, and boys should marry at 21.”

There was considerable agreement on what constitutes an “ideal” partner – of either sex. For both parties, education and good character is considered desirable. Good looks matters more for the girls, rather than the boys. Job or family wealth is considered to be more important for the guys than the girls. In Sylhet, an “ideal” husband is somebody who is established and honest and an “ideal” wife is somebody who is *shongshari* (good at household tasks), has good character and is good looking. The Hindu male group in Chittagong is cynical about what brides look for in a boy: “all the girls want in a husband is money – money, character, none of it matters. If a boy has money, he will get a bride”. They said The Kalyanpur *basti* boys had a lot more discussion on what constitutes a good woman, and they seemed quite concerned about the “morality” of women today – particularly of their “easy” female colleagues in the garments factories. The Kalyanpur *basti* girls, on the other hand, were quite cynical in their comments about a good husband: “a bad husband is someone who beats you in public, in front of everyone; a good husband is someone who beats you quietly, at home, so no one realizes.

There were variations in portrayals of an ideal family. Some groups of young men focused on women who would be homemakers – raising the children properly and looking after their aging in-laws. Ideally, they would be engaged in various income generating activities while based within the homestead. On the other hand, many of the women’s groups focused on establishing themselves as independent income earners. For many of the women, it was important that they *not* be dependent on their husbands for their own needs. University-going males, especially those at Jahangirnagar University, view marriage as a partnership of equals, and aspire towards marriages with girls with similar educations to them, who are also working as professionals.

Almost of our respondents told us that they would like two children. It is difficult to raise more children these days, the youth groups told us, because you cannot give all your children all the necessary opportunities. Ideally, men and women told us they would like a boy and a girl. However, according to most of them, if they had two girls, they would not try for any more. An exception was the group of young Hindu women in Chittagong who told us that if they had two girls, they would keep trying for a boy “who would inherit the family name”. In some of the groups, there was a debate about whether to have more or less children. In the *madrassa* group, for example, the youths said that the advantage of more children is that they will be able to look after parents in their old age.

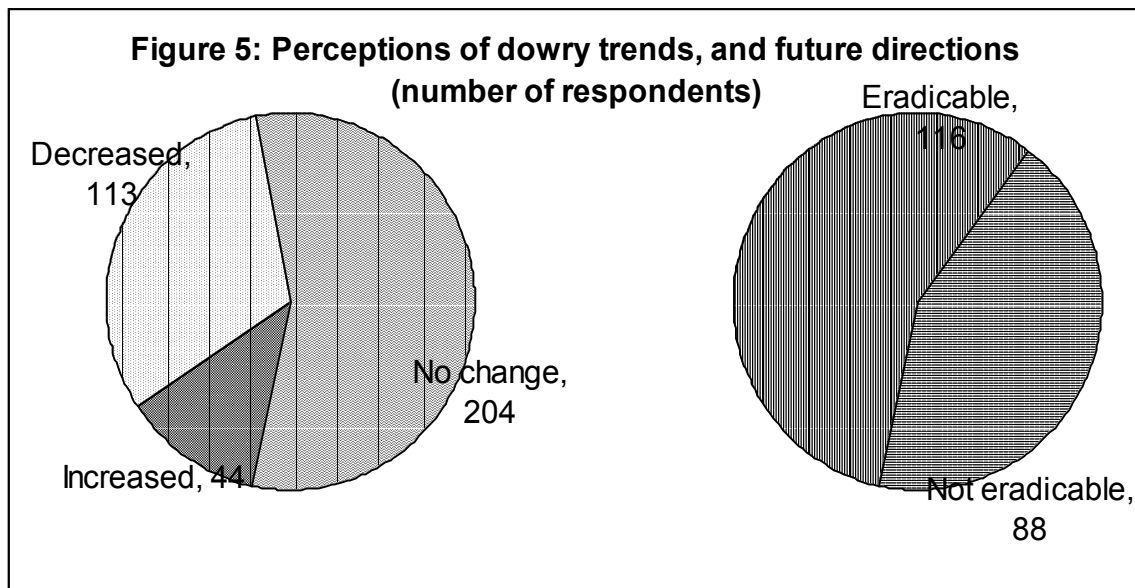
However, most of them wanted to have two children, as well, so that they could give those two children the full opportunities in life.

VII.B. Apprehensions: the threat of an early marriage, and of a bad marriage

A major threat facing youths, especially young women, is the possibility that they will get married before becoming “established in life”. This is because of the pressures on women to marry early. As extreme poor women in Rajshahi told us, “people say that a girl has become old (*bur*) when she is 18.” The groups in Chittagong also spoke of considerable community pressures to get married early, before the appropriate age. As they put it, it can be difficult for families, especially poorer families, to withstand these social pressures to get their daughters married. The rich, however, can go against society.

Poverty is another perceived cause for early marriage. Parents want to get read of the burden (*bojha*) represented by daughters and, hence, marry them off as soon as possible. There is also a perception that dowry demands increase with age and, therefore, poorer families concerned about affording a dowry marry their daughters off at an early age. Another perceived cause is insecurity: parents are concerned that as their daughters grow older men will tease them and harass them on the streets.

Another considerable apprehension is about finding a “good” partner. Women were also very concerned about domestic violence. Various youth groups, particularly ethnic minority groups, associated domestic violence with alcohol abuse. Domestic violence and adultery were commonly perceived threats to a happy marriage. Our discussion with the *basti* girls was more enlightening, as they debated the pros and cons of arranged marriages versus love marriages in terms of the possibilities of ensuring a violence-free marital life. A potential benefit of love marriages, some of them said, was that it ensured that the husband would look after you properly, because he has strong feelings towards you. Very often, however, after marriage “love is thrown out the window”. With arranged marriages, it is more of a lottery. The benefit, though, is that the woman has the security of her father’s home. If anything goes wrong, the woman can come to her father’s house and say, “this is how the boy you fixed for me treats me.” The ideal situation, it was concluded, was when the boy and his family like the girl and select her. In that case, if there are any marital problems, the woman can say, “you chose me and brought me here. I didn’t force my way into your house. So don’t treat me like this.”



Another source of threat is the dowry system. According to youth groups, the threat of a high dowry leads to more early marriages, makes it difficult to find a suitable husband, and leads to greater risks of marital conflicts. However, as Figure 5 below demonstrates, most youth groups feel that the practice of dowry is on the decline and they are confident that the dowry system can be/will be completely eradicated in the future.

There was also a sense that only certain types of young men or women are able to find good partners. The young men who are educated, come from good families, and have good jobs are able to find good partners, while those women who are good looking and/or come from good families are able to find good brides. For the remainder, it is – as the Kalyanpur *basti* women put it – a matter of luck and fate.

VII.C. Control: a compromise solution...

As the discussion above indicates, families and parents play a very large role in the decision of when to marry and who to marry. Youth groups resented familial or parental control over the decision of when to marry, especially if marriage was taking place before they were established. The prevalence of early marriage was blamed, to a degree, on unenlightened parents. Some of the more elite groups, the young professionals and the foreign-educated youths, were quite upset by parental pressures to getting married: as one of the young women put it, “if someone mentions marriage to me yet again, I think I will explode”.

On the other hand, there was a more positive feeling amongst better-off youths and male youths about parents being able to choose the “right” partner. The Kalyanpur *basti* boys had an interesting take on this. Only a girl of loose morals would enter into a relationship with a boy. Hence, a love marriage almost by definition will involve a girl with loose morals. Hence, arranged marriages are much better. On the other hand, for poor women, the chances of finding an “ideal” partner is, as discussed above, a matter of luck or fate.

However, most groups of youth said, that in an ideal world solution, a marriage should have the blessings of the groom and the bride, as well as their respective parents. A marriage should only take place if all four sides are willing to it. Without the willingness of all sides, young men in Chittagong argued, there will be “disharmony in family life.”

Amongst the better-off groups, there was a perception that their parents would approve of whoever they chose to marry, even *bideshis*. The young professionals and the foreign-educated youths seemed to have more control over who they marry. These young men and women felt that their parents would give them more freedom in choosing the right partner. The debate in this context was about whether it would be okay to marry someone outside their culture – a *bideshi*. It was felt, that for many people, their parents would accept such a marriage, either willingly or because they feel like they do not have much of a choice. However, some of the foreign-educated youths said that they would, personally, like to marry someone from their own culture so that their children “speak the language and are, culturally, more Bangladeshi.”

VII.D. Planning

In terms of planning, the immediate steps confronting youths, especially young men, is to establish themselves in life – complete their educations and start a career. For young women, it is to complete as much of their education as possible before parents start putting them under pressure to marry. The uncertainties of when one becomes established in life can, therefore, make planning difficult. The perceived differences in the appropriate age for men and women to marry make it difficult to plan to marry a girlfriend or a boyfriend, especially since they are usually of the same age. The

difficulties of the Jahangirnagar students of marrying their girlfriends or boyfriends, because they have to wait for the man to become “established in life” are illustrative.

In general, however, not much planning goes into marriages and family formation – other than the decision of when to marry. Generally, according to most youths, finding the ideal partner and having a happy family life is a matter of fate or luck, rather than conscious planning.

VIII. Transition to a healthy and secure lifestyle

In our consultations, we did not get a sense that health is a major concern for the youth in terms of their future planning. Rather, the transition to a healthy lifestyle is a corollary of a successful transition to continuing education, work, and family formation. Therefore, transition to a healthy lifestyle does not require separate planning. However, the youth groups were very clear in identifying the major threats to health and in indicating how these could be overcome.

VIII.A. Threats to health

The major threats to a healthy life identified by the youth groups are bulleted below:

- Improper sanitation
- Lack of appropriate nutrition
- Vices like drugs, alcohol, tobacco and pornography
- Physical labour
- Lack of sports facilities
- Lack of medical services

Poverty was, once more, identified as a major factor leading to an unhealthy lifestyle. Poorer families, it was felt by the youth groups would suffer from improper nutrition, be more likely to engage in hard physical labour, and would not be able to afford medical services. The health threats perceived by poorer groups were about sanitation, nutrition and physical labour. The poorer groups, however, did not associate poor sanitation directly with poverty, but with a “lack of awareness.” By and large, the male groups were more concerned about the health effects of vices and the lack of sports facilities, while women groups were more concerned about improper sanitation. There were also concerns about the lack of medical facilities in rural parts of the country. The slum dwellers were more concerned than most groups about sanitary conditions.

VIII.B. Threats to security

There are two major sources of insecurity that the different youth groups spoke about. Firstly, insecurities related to the rise of terrorism in Bangladesh and, secondly, insecurities stemming from the violation of rights by the state. Some of the ethnic minority groups in Rajshahi, spoke of insecurities related to their status – the majority Bengalis harass them and their women. However, in general, youth groups do not feel a threat from violent or property crimes, and there is a general perception that crime has decreased in the country. Interestingly, with the exception of the Paharia women in Rajshahi, none of the young women spoke of gender-specific insecurities. This is surprising given that many of them explained early marriage as a response to perceived insecurities of young women.

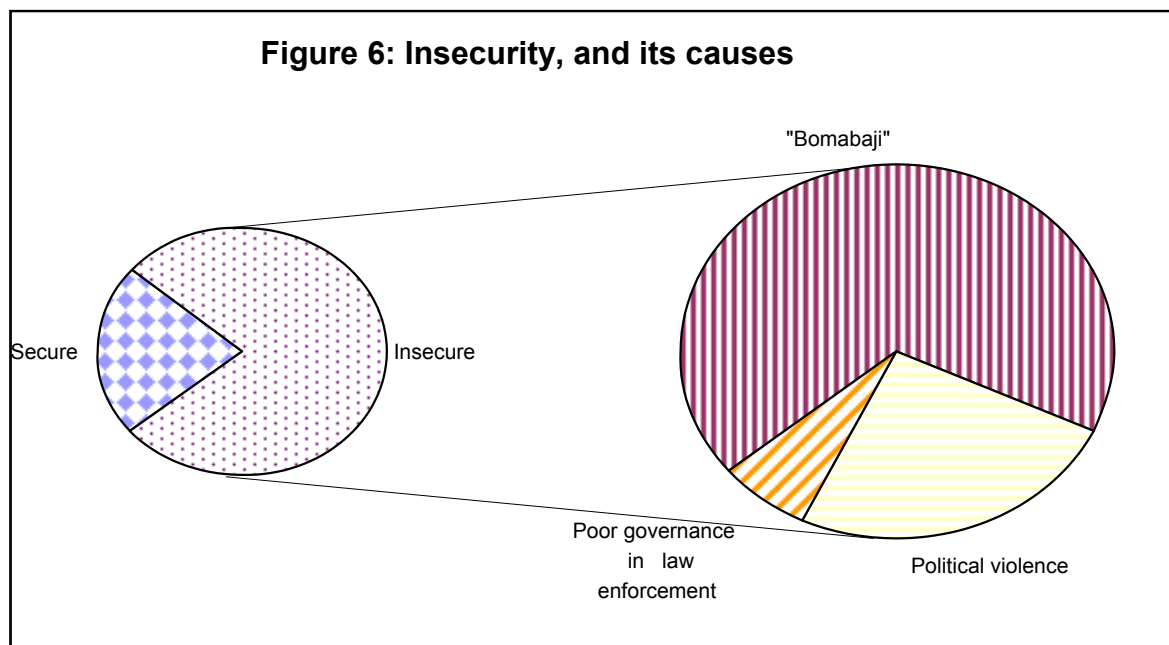
Many of the youth groups were very concerned about the increase in terrorist activities in Bangladesh. They had received news of these bombings through various news sources, such as papers, the radio, the TV news, etc. The bombings were also a topic of much discussion. As several of the youth groups, in all four regions of the country, put it to us: “no one can be considered safe

now, no matter who you are. You can get caught in a bombing.” The onus of solving this situation was, also, placed squarely on the state.

Another important source of insecurity was the state, itself. The three groups of *basti*-dwellers spoke of police harassment. Amongst the working boys in the *basti*, many had been picked up randomly by the police and one boy still bore the bruises of his beatings. The *basti*-dwellers also spoke about insecurities regarding their dwelling places. The slum had been evicted about two years ago and many of them had only recently moved back. These random evictions by the state are another significant source of insecurity for the *basti*-dwellers. Similarly, Rajshahi University students spoke of police raids in the university, and how innocent students would also get picked up.

The Paharia community similarly complained about how state forces continually harass them for various reasons. The Paharia community also said that the state fails to protect them against harassments by Bengalis. For example, Paharia women said that when Bengali women are harassed on the way to school, it is possible to protest and get the state to intervene; however, if Paharia women are harassed, the state will not step in to help.

In responding to the survey, most youths told us that the current situation in the country made them feel insecure, and most of them traced the causes of their insecurity to the recent spate of bombings (see Figure 6).



VIII.C. Responsibilities for health and security

The health and security demands that the youths make of the state are quite interesting. Rural youth groups argued that sanitation was a personal responsibility, rather than the responsibility of the state. The state could, however, play a role in increasing awareness and increasing the availability of sanitary latrines. The provision of healthcare, however, was clearly felt to be a state responsibility. In the urban slums, however, sanitation was felt to be a responsibility of the state, or at least of the municipality and slum-dwellers placed greater emphasis on state provisions of drains, latrines, and sources of clean water.

With regard to security, it was felt that the state should provide adequate protection against crimes, like theft or robbery. However, there was more uncertainty regarding the state's responsibility with regard to the recent rise in militancy. Interestingly, some groups argued that, in the context of the recent spate of bombings, it was the responsibility to individuals to be more alert and aware. From our survey, we find that most youth groups perceive the state to be "partially" fulfilling their responsibilities with regard to provisions of health care and of security (87.2% for both services) and the remainder felt that the state was "completely" fulfilling its responsibilities. Only one individual felt that the state had completely failed with respect to these responsibilities.

Overall, the consultations showed that the youths do not have a very clear sense of where the responsibilities with regard to these three "services" – sanitation, health care, and security – lie. In fact, it is unclear whether or not these three are viewed as services. With regard to sanitation and security, there is a sense that this is an environmental variable, and the responsibility lies with people themselves, rather than with government or the state.

VIII.D. Planning

As mentioned earlier, most of the threats to health are related to livelihoods and occupations. Hence, the major strategy for transition to a healthy lifestyle are related to being successful in completing a certain level of education and/or building a livelihood strategy that is not physically demanding. Through being successful in these other key transitions, the young men and women hope to get good nutrition, avoid hard physical labour, and access proper medical services.

Many of the threats to security – from either the state or terrorism – are perceived to be out of the control of most youth groups. The onus is on the state to solve these problems. The youths do not feel that they can do anything with regard to this.

However, the *basti* is perceived to be a particularly unhealthy and insecure place to live. The *basti* dwellers are concerned about the lack of appropriate sanitation and the prevalence of a range of vices. The *basti* dwellers strategy is to move out of the slum. The boys spoke of moving their families back to the village, and the girls spoke of moving out of the slum into the surrounding *moholla*.

IX. Transition to meaningful citizenship

Most of the youth groups were too focused on their aspirations with regard to continuing education, livelihoods, or family formation to give much thought towards giving back to the community. There were two notable exceptions: the politically active students in Jahangirnagar University and the foreign-educated youths. For both of these youths, their primary motivation was involvement in "nation-building" and aspirations to work or continuing education followed along these lines. For the other groups, the reverse seemed to be more important. Transition to work or continuing education was primary and these would, in turn, influence how they could give back to the country or the community. As one of the foreign-educated students told us:

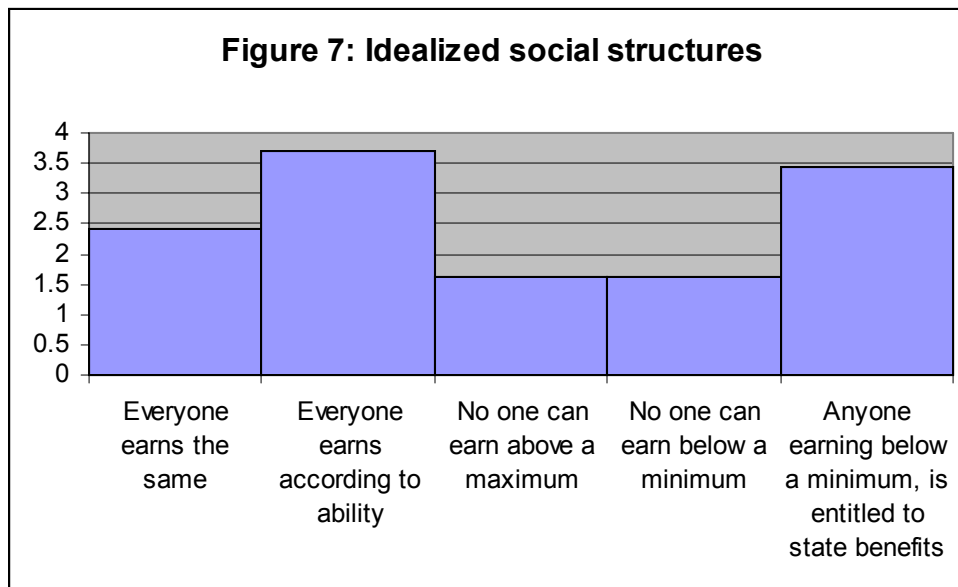
For most people, there are real concerns about how they will afford the various necessities of life – what they will do, where will they live – things like that. For us, these concerns are not so major, and we have time to think about why. Why will I do this, and what benefit will I bring to the world by doing this?

As discussed earlier, politically active students in Jahangirnagar are concerned about the loss of Bengali culture in the face of threats from "imperialism, capitalism and globalization." Their aspirations are, therefore, linked quite closely with preserving and promoting "authentic" Bangladeshi culture. Their career and educational aspirations are, correspondingly, quite closely linked to this

broader aspiration. Several of them spoke, rather dreamily, of going back to their villages and working there as a school teacher. One of them wanted to go abroad to become a filmmaker and to return and make films that reflected the “authentic” Bangladesh.

The foreign-educated youth had a very different perspective on Bangladesh. This group was optimistic about Bangladesh and looked upon globalization and capitalism as positive forces. They wished to associate themselves with the mainstream of policy thinking and making in the country. Their ambitions, in terms of nation building, were also rather grand. Some of them spoke of “establishing the rule of law” in Bangladesh; others spoke about the need to strengthen democratic institutions; and the need of successful, large scale private enterprises was also discussed.

As part of our survey questionnaire, we had asked youth groups about their ideals regarding future Bangladesh, asking them the extent to which they support different types of distribution of income – everyone earns the same, everyone earns according to ability, people can’t earn above a maximum, people can’t earn below a minimum, and a society where people earning below a minimum are entitled to welfare benefits. We have taken the mean of the scores to indicate average support, and a higher mean indicates a higher level of support. As Figure 7 below demonstrates, maximum support was for society where everyone earns according to ability, and people who earn below a certain amount is entitled to state benefits. The findings were similar when the question was posed differently and youths were asked to choose any one system. Most youths (61%) chose a society where everyone earns according to ability, followed by a society with state provisions of social safety nets (25%).



Other youth groups also aspired to contributing to their communities though, perhaps, in smaller and more concrete ways. Most of the groups believe that professional success is, in itself, a means of contributing to the country. Also, in the context of Bangladesh, working with integrity and honesty can be an effective contribution. As *madrassa* students in Rajshahi put it, “there are no honest government workers in this area. If we did our work with honesty and we worked hard and sincerely, we would be helping out our country.” Entrepreneurship was also recognized as a contribution to the country as it created employment opportunities for other people. Ethnic minorities in Rajshahi were also interested in making others aware of their community, as most people did not even know about their existence.

Some university students and professionals are already engaged with civil society. The young professionals in JCI arrange “training of trainers” sessions, where young people learn communication skills and other business skills. They are also engaged in the national policy sphere: the JCI wrote a response to the last national budget, from a youth perspective. Further, during natural disasters, the JCI responds with fund drives, etc. University students are similarly involved. General students in Jahangirnagar University are also trying to contribute to their localities. A group of students from Kurigram spoke of various initiatives – with regard to education and enterprise – that they are trying to undertake in Kurigram.

30% of the youths we surveyed are involved with any formal clubs or organizations. Amongst this 30%, a group of youths were involved with BRAC female youth groups known as *kishori kendras* (28% of those involved). Most of the others were involved with either sports clubs (33% of those involved) or with cultural organizations (24% of those involved). Amongst the rest, four were members of libraries; one individual was involved with a newspaper; one with a political party; and

On the other hand, all of the youth groups had a very negative perception of politics and political leaders and did not want to go into politics. This included politically active students at Jahangirnagar who said that students nowadays go into politics to ensure better facilities, or to get a good job when they graduate – not to make contributions for the country. This perception was held by all the other major groups who feel that politics is meant to enrich oneself rather than serve the country. The only notable exceptions were two members of the foreign-educated group and one member of the Kalyanpur *basti* working boys who said that politics was the only platform through which a large impact could be made in terms of “nation-building”.

These generally negative perceptions of politics were borne out by our survey findings. 25% of the youth who responded to our questionnaire wanted to join politics. Those who wanted to join, were interested in “developing the country” or to “develop the local area”.

X. Conclusions: policy demands of the youth

The youth groups articulated several policy demands with respect to each of the transitions. These policy demands are targeted mostly at the state, but also to NGOs. These demands are not, however, targeted at local elites or local government as most youth groups have very negative perceptions of them. By and large, the youth feel that local elites and local government are too self-interested to do anything for anyone else, including youths.

Transition to continuing education:

- Flexible schooling so that young men and women can combine secondary schooling with income earning activities.
- Combining vocational training with secondary schooling, so that secondary school graduates have options for self-employment if they do not get a job.
- Opportunities for part-time work for university students, so students can support themselves while in university.

Transition to work:

- Loans for youths interested in starting business ventures, as capital is the greatest barrier to self-employment.

- Increased day-care centres in urban areas so that women can combine full-time salaried employment with their family responsibilities.
- Job centres to facilitate the search for salaried employment.
- Addressing corruption and nepotism in the formal labour market.
- Creating more opportunities for employment, especially in science and technology sectors in addition to the existing opportunities for business graduates.

Transition to family formation:

- Addressing the problems of early marriage.
- Addressing the problem of dowry.

Transition to healthful and secure lifestyles:

- Protection of negative rights of citizens from harassment by state agencies, particularly law enforcement agencies.
- Rectifying governance problems in law and order agencies of the state.
- Provision of good quality health care facilities in various parts of Bangladesh.

Transition to meaningful citizenship:

- More formal youth organizations, so that the youth can become active members of civil society.
- Increased opportunities for youth to engage in social work and community assistance programmes.