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Escaping poverty: patterns and causes of poverty exits in rural Bangladesh

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What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty.

Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation.

This is different from the transitorily poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.

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Abstract

This paper uses findings from 293 life-history interviews, conducted by the author and a small team of researchers in rural Bangladesh in 2007, to examine what can be learned about patterns of exit from poverty. The author argues that narrative-based studies of how individuals move out of, or into poverty can complement variable-based analyses of aggregate poverty trends. The analysis of poverty exits in this paper shows that individuals on trajectories of long-term improvement in wellbeing tend to more effectively exploit a limited set of work-oriented or asset-related opportunity types, and many of these can be identified from life-history interviews. The most important of these included, in order of frequency across the set of life histories: rural farm and non-farm-related businesses (some supported by loans); land asset accumulation, livestock production; remittances and support from sons' and (to a lesser extent) daughters' incomes; and crop production. Life histories also show that individuals enjoying long-term wellbeing improvement differed in key ways from people showing trajectories of long-term wellbeing decline. The paper explores these differences and discusses implications for both productive and protective poverty reduction policies.

Keywords: poverty dynamics, chronic poverty, mixed methods, Bangladesh

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Contents

1 Introduction	4
2 Methods	6
3 Conceptualising and identifying poverty exits.....	10
4 Patterns in improving and declining trajectories	13
5 Patterns observed in poverty exits	19
5.1 Small businesses.....	22
5.2 The accumulation of land assets	24
5.3 Livestock.....	26
5.4 Sons' or daughters' income	27
5.5 Agriculture.....	29
5.6 Salaried work	32
6 Discussion and implications	35
References.....	37
Appendix	39

1 Introduction

This paper uses findings from 293 life-history interviews, conducted by the author and a small team of researchers in rural Bangladesh in 2007, to examine what can be learned about patterns of exit from poverty. The life-history interviews were from 161 households in eight districts of Bangladesh. From the 293 life-history interviews, 44 people were identified as having moved out of poverty at some stage during their life, and were still out of poverty at the time of the interview. Life-history participants were selected as a subsample of a larger longitudinal 2,152-household study. The overall project was a sequenced mixed-methods research project investigating poverty dynamics and the impact of development interventions in rural Bangladesh (see Davis and Baulch (2010) for a detailed description of the full project).

Findings from the associated larger quantitative household survey support a picture of substantial reduction in head-count poverty in rural Bangladesh (see Quisumbing and Baulch, 2009; Davis and Baulch, 2009; 2011). Recent Bangladesh Household Expenditure Surveys also confirm a substantial decline in the incidence of poverty in rural Bangladesh over recent years (see Sen and Hulme, 2006; World Bank 2008). Most indicators of human development have also substantially improved in rural Bangladesh.¹

The life-history interviews in this project support and supplement the more aggregate findings derived from conventional quantitative household surveys. Case-based studies of poverty dynamics in developing countries are few, so narrative accounts of *how* people move out of poverty, in individual cases, can usefully supplement the knowledge derived from surveys about *how much* poverty is reduced, across categories of people, in more aggregate terms. In this paper I explore mobility patterns from the life stories of the 293 individuals, and examine in more detail the patterns that emerged amongst those who had exited from poverty, looking both within individual cases and in comparison between cases.

Within-case analysis of exit from poverty allows an examination of the causes of change in individual's lives. Poverty exits were identified as cases where stories of improvement clearly showed a transition from a 'poor' situation to a 'non-poor' situation during their lifetime — where a person's welfare was judged to have improved from conditions below the national poverty line, to above it. The assessment of welfare was based on a simple scoring approach which took into account general wellbeing, assets owned, income and consumption levels, and future vulnerability to common crises.²

¹ Poverty levels in Bangladesh declined from 49 per cent in 2000 to about 40 per cent in 2005 (BHIES 2005), life expectancy rose, fertility rates were halved in 20 years, and school attendance for girls between 5 and 24 went from 17% in 1981 to 41% in 2001. Under-five mortality decreased from 133 to 94 per 1000 live births between 1989 and 1999 and infant mortality declined to 66 in BDHS 1999-2003 from 87 per 1000 live births in BDHS 1993-94. Maternal mortality declined from 574 per 100,000 live births in 1991 to 320 per 100,000 live births in 2001 (BDHS 2007). In 2006 the estimated maternal mortality ratio was 290 per 100,000 live births (UNFPA).

² For an examination of the differences between per capita expenditure assessments of wellbeing and a qualitative scoring approach for this study see Davis and Baulch (2009).



The following section describes the methods used to conduct the life histories and record and analyse the narrative life-history data. Section 3 outlines the conceptual approach that underlies this paper's analysis of improvements and declines in people's life trajectories over the long term. Section 4 explores observed patterns in sources of improvement and decline across the whole set of life histories, and also observed differences between improving and declining trajectories. Section 5 then examines the 44 life histories where a poverty exit took place and from these presents six selected life histories to show how the common sources of improvement interacted leading to exits from poverty.

2 Methods

The author led a team of researchers from DATA Bangladesh in conducting the 293 life-history interviews in the eight districts in Table 1 between April and October 2007. The households were selected as a subsample of a CPRC-IFPRI-DATA longitudinal study of poverty dynamics in rural Bangladesh, which covered 2,152 households (1,907 original households) from 14 districts.

Three intervention types – microfinance, educational transfers and agricultural technologies – corresponded with initial evaluation studies in the quantitative survey, which were initially conducted separately, with baselines in 1994 for a microfinance study, 1996 for an agricultural technology study, and 2000 for an educational transfers study. These interventions are described in Zeller *et al.* (2001); Hallman *et al.* (2007); Ahmed (2005); Kumar and Quisumbing (2009); Baulch (2010) and Davis and Baulch (2009; 2011).

Households from the three initial evaluation studies were combined for the recent 2006-7 three-phases of sequenced qualitative-quantitative-qualitative research, to allow analysis of an entire panel of households as if they had been part of the same longitudinal study. This was possible because the initial studies had used similar survey methods all administered by DATA Bangladesh.³

For the subsample of life-history interviews (phase 3 of the 2006-7 research), eight of the original 14 districts were selected in such a way that a range of geographic and agricultural conditions typical of rural Bangladesh were represented. Sites were selected across the initial evaluation studies, and two villages per site⁴ were selected in different unions. In each site, 20 households were selected from the original panel across these two villages. Five households were randomly selected from each of four poverty-transition categories based on per capita household expenditure calculated from the quantitative survey (see Davis and Baulch, 2010 for a detailed explanation of these selection methods).

³ Data Analysis and Technical Assistance Ltd. (DATA) is a research consultancy firm based in Dhaka with well-established expertise in conducting large-scale social surveys and other research activities. The 2006-07 study aimed to integrate and sequence quantitative and qualitative methods, in three phases: Phase I involved focus-group discussions with four groups (of poor and better-off women, plus poor and better-off men) in each village. The focus groups aimed to elicit perceptions of changes, group members' perceptions of the interventions under study, and the degree to which these interventions affected people's lives (compared to other events in the community). Phase II was a quantitative survey of the original households and new households that had split off from the original households but remained in the same district. The household survey took place from November 2006 to February 2007, the same agricultural season as the original surveys, with multi-topic questionnaires designed to be comparable across sites and with the original questionnaires from the evaluation studies. Phase III consisted of a qualitative study based on life histories of 293 men and women in 161 selected households in 8 of the districts in the original quantitative study. The aim of this phase was to understand the processes and institutional contexts which influence individual and household livelihood trajectories. Fieldwork for this final phase of the study was undertaken between March and October 2007.

⁴ 'Sites' refer to districts in all cases except for Mymensingh and Kishoreganj where the 'site' and the two selected villages spanned the district boundary.

Table 1. Locations of the life history research villages

Original Intervention Type	District	Number of Villages	Number of Life Histories Conducted
Microfinance (MF)	Manikganj	2	36
	Kurigram	2	39
Educational transfers (ET)	Nilphamari	2	38
	Tangail	2	39
	Cox's Bazar	2	32
Agricultural technology (AT): household-based fish farming	Mymensingh	1	18
	Kishoreganj	1	19
Agricultural technology (AT): group-based fish farming	Jessore	2	36
Agricultural technology (AT): improved vegetables	Manikganj	2	36
	Total	16	293

In the life-history interviews, one man and one woman were interviewed separately in each household. Research participants were often husband and wife, but in some cases, such as when one partner had died, we interviewed one parent and their son or daughter. When a household member wasn't available – which was more often a man than a woman, especially during the main April-May rice harvest – or when there was only one adult household member, we conducted one life-history interview in the household. In the end we conducted 293 life-history interviews in 161 households (133 men and 160 women) in 16 villages and eight districts. Interviewing two household members allowed immediate cross-checking, gave a gendered perspective, an alternative view of household dynamics, and allowed a mixed-sex team to work effectively, with men usually interviewing men and women interviewing women.

On the same day of life-history interviews, interviewers wrote up the interview in Bengali in a format which had been devised in an initial workshop and refined in field discussions with the author and research team. Interviewers also wrote fieldwork diaries containing reflective impressions and lessons-learned about methods, in addition to the more formally-agreed write-up of the life history. These diaries were translated and became a part of the qualitative data set. When the author was with the team, he participated in interviews with either men or women.

Interviews and focus-group discussions were recorded, with permission of the research participants, with small unobtrusive digital voice recorders. We did not attempt to write full transcripts, but digital recordings were used for checking back on interviews for the initial same-day write-up of the life-history narrative in Bengali, for later analysis, and for the final

anonymised write-up in English.⁵ The life history was written as a chronological account of life events, identifying causal mechanisms and drawing from discussions which had encouraged counterfactual thinking. The aim was to produce, as accurately as possible, the participant's perspective on his or her life trajectory, the causes behind improvement or decline in wellbeing, and how life could have been if the events that emerged – both positive and negative – had not occurred.

We spent about two weeks in each of the eight sites during the life-history phase of the research and later revisited most of the households to check and discuss texts and diagrams with participants. During the initial days working in each village we also arranged a time for 'knowledgeable people' to attend a focus-group discussion on the last day of our research in the village. This was usually held in a school building or in a near village leader's house. We tried to have a *Union Parishad* (Union Council) member and a number of elderly people in attendance.⁶

During the life-history interviews we used national and local historical markers, such as the 1971 war of independence or the 1988 floods, to pinpoint years of events described by the research participants. As an interview progressed, a chronological timeline of life events was built up. At the end of a life history interview, the researcher who facilitated the interview drew a diagram of research participant's life history using this timeline of events. At the same time the interviewer reviewed the main points of the life trajectory and asked the interviewee to identify and rank the three or four most important sources of opportunity that had made the most difference for his or her long-term wellbeing. Similarly the three or four most important sources of downward pressure were also identified and ranked. These choices were recorded and used to generate frequencies of downward pressures and upward opportunities, as shown in Tables 3 and 4. The other researcher wrote the narrative-based life history from notes taken during the interview and the recording of the interview. Only two interviews were conducted per day to allow time for the diagram to be finalised and the interview to be written up in Bengali on the same day.

Life history diagrams were then traced, translated and anonymised by the author and made available with the final anonymised, translated and edited narrative life histories. The level of wellbeing (or 'life condition' – *obosta* in Bengali) at different points in the life trajectory was indicated on the diagrams using a scale of one to five, using the categories described in Table 2 below, based on life-conditions described by the research participant in the interview.

We considered that the line between levels 2 and 3 corresponded roughly with the national poverty line used in our quantitative household assessments. These five levels were defined by the qualitative research team in advance, and were applied consistently across villages. To minimise recall errors and other forms of misreporting, the wellbeing levels assigned

⁵ Examples of these life histories are provided at <http://www.sdri.org.uk/bangladesh.asp>.

⁶ In this paper, focus-group discussions refer to these exercises rather than a separate set of 116 focus-group discussions conducted in 2006 with findings reported in Davis (2007).

when the life history diagrams were drawn were verified by the focus-group discussion with local people who knew the households well, and then finalised in a meeting of the qualitative research team at the end of fieldwork in each village. In these meetings, all information about households and members was used, and levels of wellbeing were agreed by consensus after discussion. These discussions were also digitally recorded for later reference. The various forms of data generated in this research were then coded and analysed using NVivo 8 by the author.⁷

Table 2. Qualitative wellbeing levels for individuals

Level	English	Bengali	Guideline
1	Very poor or destitute	<i>khub gorib, na keye chole</i>	Suffering tangible harm to health because of poverty, generally due to insufficient food. Tend to be landless or near landless.
2	Poor	<i>gorib</i>	Very vulnerable but eating reasonably well. Could easily move into level 1 due to a common shock. If land is owned, it usually less than an acre for a medium sized household.
3	Medium	<i>madhom</i>	A common shock would not result in tangible harm or going without food. Have household assets, or generate household income, equivalent to between one and two acres of land for a medium sized household.
4	Rich	<i>dhoni</i>	Hold household assets or generate household income equivalent to that generated by two to ten acres for a medium-sized household.
5	Very rich	<i>khub dhoni</i>	Hold household assets or generate household income equivalent to that generated by ten acres or more for a medium-sized household.

The qualitative methods drew on a life-histories approach developed by Davis (see Davis 2005, 2009), which is relatively new to Bangladesh although well-established for poverty research in other countries. The life-history approach draws on a long tradition in social research which began with the Chicago School of sociology (see Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958; Miller, 2000; 2007 and Dewilde, 2003). It is also informed by multidimensional approaches to poverty research, as illustrated in studies of social exclusion, human development and capabilities, and participatory research methods (see Stewart *et al.* (2007) for a useful discussion of these approaches).

⁷ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software package developed by QSR International.

3 Conceptualising and identifying poverty exits

For this paper, the life history interviews were analysed to identify and describe, as far as the data allowed, the factors which had most influence on people's ability to exit poverty over the long term. In order to facilitate this analysis, socioeconomic mobility is conceptualised as an outcome of a person's set of resources and capabilities interacting with events that occur through a person's life trajectory, as depicted in Figure 1.⁸ These events exert either downward pressures that are coped with, or upward opportunities that are exploited, to determine a person's trajectory of wellbeing.

The relevant resources and capabilities are those that are either *constitutive* of wellbeing – such as having a home or enjoying good health – or *instrumental* in strengthening people's ability either to cope with downward pressures or to exploit upward opportunities. For example, arable land is mostly an instrumental resource; skills useful in employment are an instrumental capability. While the distinctions between constitutive or instrumental resources and capabilities are rarely clear in real life, the terminology is useful to explore the ways that a person's assets and attributes influence his or her life trajectory. I use the word 'resource' to signal more something possessed, accessed or owned; and 'capability' to point to an attribute that allows someone to do or be something of value – although again this distinction is also hardly ever clear cut in actual life stories.⁹

The distinctive perspective taken in this paper is that the effects that opportunity-enhancing and crisis-coping resources and capabilities have in a person's life can only be understood properly within a longitudinal, dynamic perspective. This view sees a person's initial resources and capabilities interacting over time with downward pressures and upward opportunities, to determine a trajectory of wellbeing supported by subsequent levels of resources and capabilities.

⁸ I use the terms resources and capabilities to encompass the broad range of assets and attributes that determines a person's current and future wellbeing.

⁹ Sen also makes the distinction between constitutive and instrumental capabilities (see Sen 2000).

Figure 1: Conceptualising socio-economic wellbeing improvement or decline

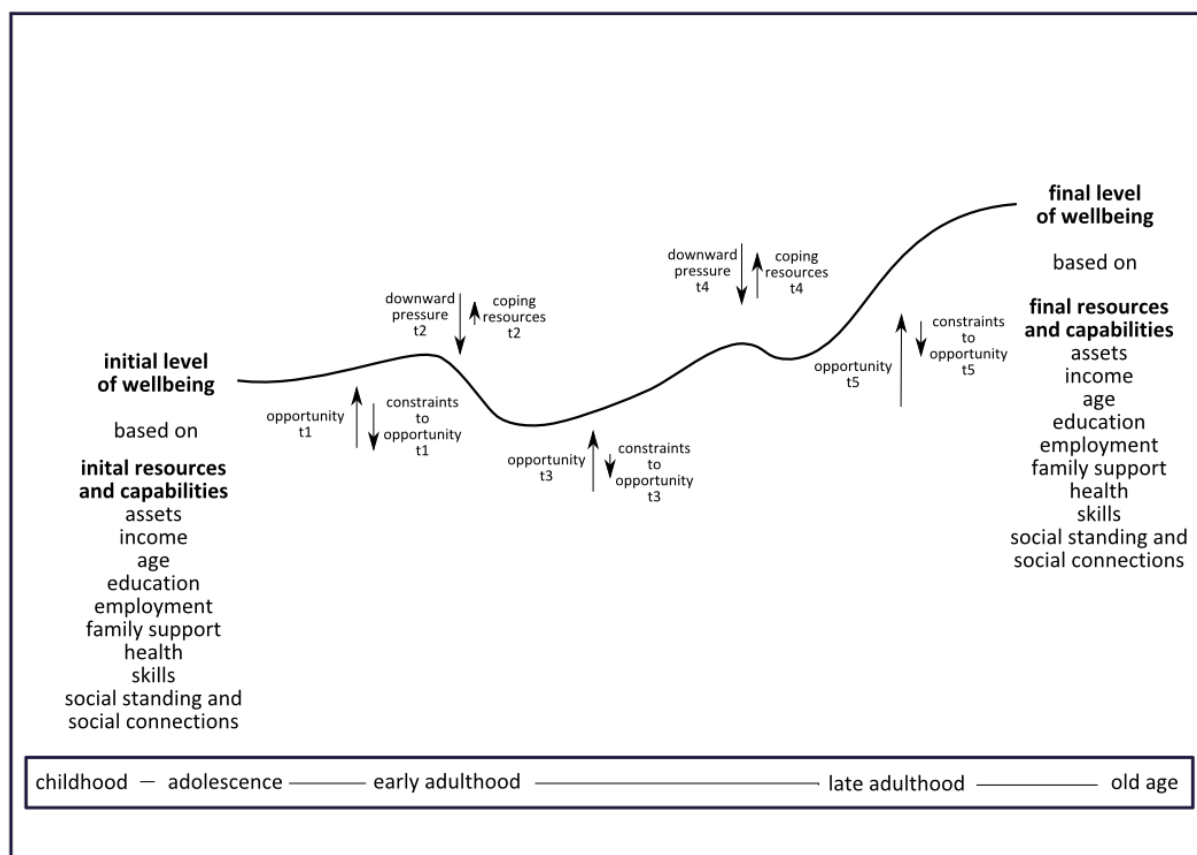


Figure 1 shows an ideal-typical life trajectory illustrating how socio-economic mobility is the outcome of the interaction of people's resources and capabilities as they cope with downward pressures or exploit upward opportunities over time. The range of resources and capabilities a person enjoys at any point in time both constitutes their current level of socioeconomic wellbeing but also determines their future ability to cope with downward pressures and exploit upward opportunities.

The figure shows how life events can be either sources of upward opportunity or of downward pressure. Any opportunity can be hindered from allowing an improvement in a person's life by various constraints. Constraints may be a lack of some instrumental resource or capability or, in more negative terms, a hindrance or a liability. For example, the opportunity to build up assets through microfinance may be constrained by a lack of business acumen or some other hindrance to income generation; the opportunity provided by employment may be constrained by the liability of ill health. On the other hand, the damage to wellbeing that a downward pressure can cause may be either buffered by coping resources, or exacerbated by some pre-existing hindrance or liability. For example, an expensive illness may be coped with by selling an asset to pay for medical care. However, if assets are sold, the stock of resources available for coping in future crises may decline in a cumulative way. This may create a trajectory where long-term harm becomes more and more difficult to avoid.

Figure 1 illustrates, in a stylised manner, an improving trajectory but indicating positive events being hindered by constraints to opportunity, and negative events being mitigated by

coping resources. A similar declining trajectory could also be drawn with longer downward arrows and shorter upward ones. The length of arrows in this figure represent strength of influence (as in a vector diagram).

In this particular trajectory we see that at time t_1 an opportunity was hindered by an almost equally strong constraint, allowing only a small improvement in wellbeing. For example, this could show rural to urban migration allowing better paid employment, but with wellbeing improvement being constrained by increased living costs (as in the case of Rubel in Figure 7). At time t_2 a strong downward pressure caused a large decline in wellbeing, because coping resources were weak. An illness accompanied by insufficient financial resources to pay for medical care may be an example of this (see the case of Selina in Figure 2). Then at time t_3 a steeper improvement in wellbeing was enjoyed when a strong source of improvement was hindered only by weak constraints; and, at time t_4 the strong downward pressure caused less damage to wellbeing because a stronger endowment of coping resources mitigated the crisis. At the bottom of the figure the line of life stages reminds us that these events occur across a person's life cycle which, in turn, influences their profile of opportunities, downward pressures, constraints and coping resources.

This conceptual scheme highlights that improving trajectories are 'caused' as much by opportunities being effectively seized, as by downward pressures being either avoided or coped with. This view is supported by the empirical life histories. It also implies that poverty reduction involves aspects of strengthening protection (from downward pressures) and enhancing production (from positive opportunities), and research to support poverty reduction should investigate both.

In the rest of this paper, I draw from this conceptual scheme to explore how levels of socioeconomic wellbeing changed over time, and, how exits from poverty took place in the actual cases we examine.

4 Patterns in improving and declining trajectories

The life history interviews show (see Table 3) that the most frequently occurring sources of upward opportunity considered to have made a difference for people's life trajectories were, in order of frequency across all the life histories: business activities; the accumulation or use of land; livestock-based enterprises; sons' or daughters' employment; agriculture or fish farming; help from relatives and inheritance; day labour; micro-finance; and, benefits from official programmes (such as the Vulnerable Groups Development Programme and the Primary Education Stipend Programme).

Common downward pressures (see Table 4) were, in order of frequency of appearance: illness and injury; dowry and wedding expenses; death of family members; division of household or property; theft or cheating; litigation; and weather-related events such as floods, cyclones and storms.

Table 3. Main causes of improvement in people's lives

Cause	Number of life histories showing this as a main cause	Per cent of life histories showing this as a main cause
business	135	46
land assets	113	39
livestock	80	27
sons and daughters working	71	24
agriculture and fish farming	69	24
help from family or inheritance	65	22
day labour	53	18
micro-finance	52	18
benefits from all official programmes	49	17
loans (including from neighbours and relatives)	47	16
salaries work	42	14
dowry receipt or favourable marriage	34	12
household or property division	25	9
educational transfers	22	8
domestic labour migration	21	7
house	12	4
irrigation	11	4
united family	10	3
assets and savings	8	3
education and training	8	3
women's employment	7	2
international labour migration	5	2
NGO non-loan benefits	5	2

Table 4. Main causes of decline in people's lives

Cause	Number of life histories showing this as a main cause	Per cent of life histories showing this as a main cause
illness and injury	220	75
dowry and marriage	114	39
death of family member	97	33
household and property division	63	22
theft or cheating	59	20
litigation	56	19
floods, cyclones, or storms	49	17
crop damage	42	14
violence, conflict or physical insecurity	41	14
family or village disputes	29	10
death or illness of livestock	28	10
disability	27	9
unemployment or low income	26	9
business loss	25	9
sale or mortgage of land or house	25	9
debt	21	7
supernatural causes and superstition	20	7
divorce and abandonment	19	6
migration	19	6
extortion corruption and harassment	17	6
lack of food	12	4
education and other expenses on children	11	4
fire	10	3
laziness or wastefulness	8	3
marital problems	8	3
river erosion	8	3
loss of assets	7	2
sale of livestock	6	2
war	5	2

Some life histories showed an overall pattern of long-term improvement (79 cases), others, long-term decline (71 cases) – as depicted in the life history diagrams. Some trajectories could not be classified either way; these were included in a 'level' group (143 cases). Trajectories were placed in the level group if a long-term (ten years or more) improving or declining trend was not apparent from the life history interview or after it had been cross checked with the focus group discussion. 44 improving trajectories also moved from level 2 to level 3 and remained at level 3 or above at the time of the interview. The line between

levels 2 and 3 was seen as roughly corresponding with the poverty line so these trajectories were seen as poverty exits.

By comparing forms of opportunity in improving life trajectories with those that are declining (as in Table 5), we see patterns of difference between these two groups of life histories. It appears that some forms of opportunity are cited more often by people in improving life trajectories, others are cited more often by those on declining trajectories, and some are cited with approximately similar frequencies across both groups. These differences provide further evidence of which forms of opportunity tend to enable poverty exits and which downward pressures tend to be most damaging.

Those people enjoying long-term improvement in socio-economic wellbeing were better able to exploit key forms of opportunity associated with productive work and asset accumulation. The most important of these differences were the ability to utilise and benefit from: land assets, business activities, agriculture and fish farming, loans (including microcredit), salaried employment, livestock, and household or property division.

In contrast those on declining trajectories more often cited official social protection and development programmes, such as the Vulnerable Groups Development Programme, or the Primary Education Stipend, as sources of opportunity – suggesting that these official programmes may be effectively reaching those who need help, but that they tend to protect people from decline, rather than lifting people out of poverty. The declining group also cited the benefits of having a united family more often than those on improving trajectories. This supports the idea that the protective support from family and relatives are also particularly important for vulnerable (declining) people. Common opportunities associated with day labour, dowry receipt or favourable marriage, and sons and daughters working, did not show much difference in frequency of citation between those on improving or declining trajectories.

However, people on declining trajectories cited the common downward pressures more frequently than those on improving trajectories. This group also cited pressures associated with household and property division, violence, conflict and physical insecurity, sale or mortgage of houses or land, migration, illnesses or injuries, and disability, more frequently than those on improving trajectories. This range of downward pressures includes a number of sources of disruptive household instabilities, insecurity, and disruption of livelihoods which could be better targeted in strategies to enhance the security of people's lives and livelihoods. The group of improving trajectories more frequently cited pressures associated with assets and productive activities, such as crop damage, floods, cyclones and storms, illness or death of livestock – as would be expected among people accumulating assets and exiting poverty but nevertheless still being beset from time to time by various setbacks.

A large number of common downward pressures occurred with similar frequency across both groups. The most frequent of these were marriage expenses, theft or cheating, and litigation.

Table 5. Frequency of causes of improvement or opportunity¹⁰

cause of improvement or opportunity	all life histories	per cent	improving trajectory	per cent	declining trajectory	per cent	% difference
land	113 ¹¹	38.6	35	44.3	14	19.7	24.6
business	135	46.1	42	53.2	23	32.4	20.8
agriculture or fish farming	69	23.5	21	26.6	7	9.9	16.7
loans	47	16.0	19	24.1	7	9.9	14.2
salaried work	42	14.3	14	17.7	3	4.2	13.5
livestock	80	27.3	21	26.6	12	16.9	9.7
household or property division	25	8.5	9	11.4	2	2.8	8.6
irrigation	11	3.8	6	7.6	2	2.8	4.8
help from relatives or inheritance	65	22.2	18	22.8	14	19.7	3.1
domestic labour migration	21	7.2	9	11.4	6	8.5	2.9
having a house	12	4.1	4	5.1	2	2.8	2.2
sons and daughters working	71	24.2	19	24.1	16	22.5	1.5
dowry receipt or favourable marriage	34	11.6	10	12.7	8	11.3	1.4
day labour	53	18.1	14	17.7	12	16.9	0.8
the benefits of a united family	10	3.4	0	0.0	5	7.0	-7.0
benefits from official programmes	49	16.7	11	13.9	18	25.4	-11.4

It makes sense that people on improving trajectories tend to experience downward pressures (see Table 6) associated with crop damage, flood, cyclones and storms (and river erosion), livestock illness or death and business loss, more frequently. We observe that these productive assets and activities are also the most important sources of poverty exit. Thus while there is room for policy interventions aimed at supporting these productive routes from the risks associated with them, such interventions will, inevitably, tend to help people who are already more likely to be on improving trajectories.

¹⁰ Causes of opportunity which were cited in fewer than 10 life histories have been omitted in Tables 5 and 6.

¹¹ Of the 113 life histories where land featured as a main cause of improvement, for 68 per cent land was acquired with help from relatives or from dowry. For 43 per cent the improvement was linked to land being purchased. In 33 per cent of these 113 cases improvement was linked to arrangements where land was used but not owned through renting, leasing, mortgaging land in, or sharecropping arrangements. For 11 per cent benefits associate with land were experienced after household separation and for nine per cent the benefit was explicitly linked to land inherited.

Table 6. Frequencies of causes of crisis or decline

cause of crisis or decline	all life histories	per cent	improving trajectory	per cent	declining trajectory	per cent	% difference
crop damage	42	14.3	20	25.3	9	12.7	12.6
floods, cyclones or storms	49	16.7	17	21.5	11	15.5	6.0
illness or death of livestock	28	9.6	8	10.1	3	4.2	5.9
family or village disputes	29	9.9	12	15.2	7	9.9	5.3
extortion, corruption or harassment	17	5.8	9	11.4	5	7.0	4.4
business loss	25	8.5	4	5.1	3	4.2	0.8
divorce or abandonment	19	6.5	6	7.6	5	7.0	0.6
theft or cheating	59	20.1	12	15.2	11	15.5	-0.3
supernatural causes and superstition	20	6.8	7	8.9	7	9.9	-1.0
fire	10	3.4	1	1.3	2	2.8	-1.6
lack of food	12	4.1	3	3.8	4	5.6	-1.8
debt	21	7.2	6	7.6	7	9.9	-2.3
litigation	56	19.1	18	22.8	18	25.4	-2.6
dowry or marriage expenses	114	38.9	34	43.0	33	46.5	-3.4
unemployment or low income	26	8.9	7	8.9	9	12.7	-3.8
death of a family member	97	33.1	23	29.1	24	33.8	-4.7
education and other children's expenses	11	3.8	3	3.8	6	8.5	-4.7
disability	27	9.2	3	3.8	8	11.3	-7.5
illness or injury	220	75.1	55	69.6	56	78.9	-9.3
migration	19	6.5	2	2.5	9	12.7	-10.1
sale or mortgage of land or house	25	8.5	6	7.6	13	18.3	-10.7
violence, conflict or physical insecurity	41	14.0	4	5.1	15	21.1	-16.1
household and property division	63	21.5	13	16.5	25	35.2	-18.8

Not only do people on declining trajectories appear to be experiencing common downward pressures with greater frequency, but it appears that they also experience certain types of downward pressure disproportionately. Household and property division; violence, conflict and physical insecurity; sale or mortgage of land or house; migration; illness or injury; and disability, are all cited more often by those on declining trajectories. These sources tend to be associated with quite disruptive life events, some of which may not be detected in household surveys because they involve changes in household constitution and location.

Household and property division is both a source of opportunity and decline but those on improving trajectories tend to cite the former more often while those declining see it more often as the latter. Those who find that household and property division disadvantages them usually experience a long-term decline due to a lack of assets. This illustrates how the same



sources of change can sometimes be good for some people and bad for others. It is also interesting how those declining tend to suffer more often from disruptive violence, conflict and physical insecurity. This supports the idea that ‘the vulnerable’ in terms of risk of socio-economic decline tend also to be physically vulnerable due to being less well endowed with the kinds of social power that can protect from violence. The higher frequency of citation of house and land sales among those in decline provides further evidence of the importance of land resources in supporting poverty exits, the corollary being that distress sales of these assets can weaken future prospects. Divorce, abandonment and litigation are experienced roughly equally by the two groups. Family and village disputes are cited more frequently by those improving – probably reflecting greater assets to have disputes over.

5 Patterns observed in poverty exits

Identifying research participants who exited poverty was not straightforward, and can be attempted in a number of ways. Per-capita household expenditure has become the metric of choice for most quantitative poverty studies in developing countries and was useful in this study as a guide to selecting and classifying households across four cells of a socio-economic transition matrix.¹²

In Davis and Baulch (2010), we examine some of the problems of using per capita household expenditure for identifying poverty transitions in Bangladesh in the light of disagreements between quantitative and qualitative assessments of socio-economic mobility of the same households. A per capita household expenditure poverty line which divides the poor from the non-poor at a point in time is a useful tool, particularly for estimating the overall incidence of poverty in a population. However, for a case-based analysis of wellbeing dynamics, it turns out to be too blunt a measure to use in an analysis of the causes of improvements or declines in people's lives. Per capita household expenditure is difficult to measure accurately, and even when it is measured well, it does not always reliably reflect the welfare of a household as a group of members, let alone of a particular household member. When it is used to detect socio-economic mobility over time these problems are magnified.

For these reasons we attempted to identify changes in a person's wellbeing trajectory, and the causes that lay behind these changes, using a qualitative approach but which made full use of the quantitative data from the participant's household but also added other dimensions of wellbeing to the assessment based on the life history narrative.¹³

Of the 44 life histories which clearly showed an exit from poverty using the scoring method (a permanent movement across the line dividing levels 2 and 3 in the wellbeing score over the life trajectory), Table 7 shows the frequencies of main opportunity sources cited as being one of the most important 3 or 4 causes of improvement.

¹² Households were initially sampled using the four categories derived from per capita household expenditure at the time of the first round of the study compared with the 2006-7 round. The categories are move up, move down, never poor, and always poor using the national poverty lines for each division extrapolated to correspond with the year of the survey rounds.

¹³ The quantitative method used to identify poverty exits was based on a standard expenditure based 'spells' approach, which is now pretty well established in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Quantitative poverty status and transitions using the household survey data were determined by comparing per capita expenditures with the BBS upper poverty lines, which vary according to year and division (Table 1). The expenditure variable was constructed from the food and non-food modules of the household survey questionnaires, with own-consumed items being valued at local market prices. Following current best practice in computing expenditures from household surveys (Deaton and Zaidi, 2002), our expenditure aggregate *excludes*: (i) dowry, wedding, pilgrimage (*Haj*), and funeral costs; (ii) durable goods; (iii) housing, and housing repairs; (iv) health and medical expenditures; and, (v) costs of legal and court cases. The BBS upper poverty lines are based on a cost of basic needs methodology, which estimates the expenditure required for a person to acquire 2,212 kcals per day plus a modest allowance for non-food expenditures (BBS, 1998 and 2006). To reflect differences in their price levels, the BBS's poverty lines vary between Statistical Metropolitan Areas (SMA), urban, and rural areas, although all our survey sites lie in rural areas.

Table 7. Opportunity sources and poverty exits

Source of opportunity	all life histories	per cent share	poverty exits (level 2 to 3)	per cent share
business	135	46.1	26	59.1
land	113	38.6	24	54.5
sons or daughters working	71	24.2	12	27.3
livestock	80	27.3	10	22.7
dowry receipt or favourable marriage	34	11.6	9	20.5
help from relatives or inheritance	65	22.2	8	18.2
loans	47	16.0	8	18.2
agriculture	69	23.5	7	15.9
salaried work	42	14.3	7	15.9
day labour	53	18.1	3	6.8
benefits from official programmes	49	16.7	3	6.8
household property division	25	8.5	3	6.8
labour migration domestic	21	7.2	3	6.8
irrigation	11	3.8	3	6.8
house	12	4.1	1	2.3
united family	10	3.4	0	0.0

Similarly Table 8 shows the frequencies of main downward pressures cited as being one of the most important three or four causes of decline.

Table 8. Downward pressures and poverty exits

	all life histories	per cent share	poverty exits (level 2 to 3)	per cent share
illness or injury	220	75.1	31	70.5
dowry and marriage	114	38.9	24	54.5
litigation	56	19.1	14	31.8
household and property division	63	21.5	10	22.7
death of a family member	97	33.1	10	22.7
theft cheating	59	20.1	9	20.5
death or illness of livestock	28	9.6	8	18.2
family and village disputes	29	9.9	8	18.2
crop damage	42	14.3	8	18.2
floods, cyclones or storms	49	16.7	6	13.6
extortion corruption and harassment	17	5.8	5	11.4
unemployment or low income	26	8.9	4	9.1
business losses	25	8.5	4	9.1
violence, conflict or physical insecurity	41	14.0	4	9.1
debt	21	7.2	3	6.8
sale or mortgage of land or house	25	8.5	3	6.8
lack of food	12	4.1	2	4.5
education and other expense on children	11	3.8	2	4.5
divorce or abandonment	19	6.5	1	2.3
migration	19	6.5	1	2.3
fire	10	3.4	1	2.3
disability	27	9.2	1	2.3
supernatural causes	20	6.8	0	0.0

Like the larger group of improving trajectories, the poverty exit group also show that productive asset-related and work-related activities (business activities, land accumulation, sons' and daughters' working and livestock production) were important in allowing them to exit poverty. In this group, dowry receipt and favourable marriage is also a fairly frequent cause of poverty exit – keeping in mind that dowry payment is also a downward pressure for others. Dowry receipt also often corresponds to the commencement of sons' incomes making a significant contribution to household wellbeing, with dowry money commonly funding new productive asset accumulation or business activities. Day labour (usually undertaken by poorer people) and benefits from official programmes again occur less frequently as sources of poverty exits for this group.

In order to illustrate the way that gradual improvements in wellbeing lead to exits from poverty, the following subsections describe and discuss a selection of six (improving or poverty-exiting) life histories which illustrate a number of the common sources of opportunity and how these are usually interspersed with the of downward pressures also discussed. These subsections are entitled small businesses, livestock, sons or daughters' incomes,

agriculture and salaried work because the selected life histories illustrate these causes of poverty exit most clearly. However, some of these categories overlap. The trajectories also illustrate how poverty exits are the product of opportunities being seized as well as downward pressures being coped with, as depicted in Figure 1.

5.1 Small businesses

46 per cent of the 293 life histories cited involvement in small businesses as a significant source of opportunity, as did 53 per cent of the 79 improving trajectories. Of the 44 poverty exits identified, 26 life histories, or 59 per cent, also cited involvement in small businesses as one of the three or four most significant sources of opportunity in their lives. People with improving trajectories cited business involvement as a source of opportunity more often than those on declining trajectories, which suggests that business involvement effectively supports poverty reduction (see Tables 5 and 7), but mainly for those with the resources and capabilities which allow them to benefit from business activities.

Overall, the forms of business that appeared in the life histories reflect the wide range of activities found in the rural economy of Bangladesh. The activities include references to other categories in the analysis, such as microfinance and livestock – when these were linked to businesses. Dealing in various agricultural commodities such as unprocessed rice, jute, other agricultural crops, and fruit and vegetables was common; as was dealing in building materials such as sand, timber or bamboo. Livestock dealing (cows, goats, horses and poultry) was also common, and was sometimes linked to livestock rearing or income from cow's milk sales. Some livestock also provided income from cultivation (e.g. bullocks or buffalo) or transport (such as horse-drawn carts). Other forms of transport provision included the very common use of cycle rickshaws, flat decked cycle van *garis*, or the person-powered *thela garis*. A number of motorised forms of people and goods transport also formed the basis of transport-based businesses. Some of these vehicles are manufactured in local engineering workshops using modified agricultural engines.

A number of businesses were also linked to crop cultivation and processing: selling irrigation water from shallow tube wells (diesel or electric), power tillers, rice husking machines, or running grain mill businesses. Various kinds of shops, market stalls and door-to-door selling of produce were also common. Groceries, food snacks, dried fish, milk, and jewellery were typical items sold from a range of rural shops and stalls. Other services also formed the basis of small businesses such as hair cutting, money lending, medical services (some involving traditional medical practices by traditional healers or *kobiraj*). A number of new types of business were also evident, such as hiring out mobile phones services or small businesses associated with servicing or trading in by-products of the mainly urban-based garments industry.

Some of the main features of small business activities are as follows:

- 1) Many households had complex portfolios of income generating activities, for example combining rural businesses with agriculture, livestock, salaried work and day labour;

- 2) if more than one household member was able to contribute to household income through business activities then improvements became more likely;
- 3) some businesses failed, causing decline and indebtedness;
- 4) business activities which involved the accumulation of both protective and productive assets were particularly effective in supporting poverty exits.

The life trajectory of Selina, outlined in Figure 2 below, illustrates how opportunities linked to business contributed to a poverty exit in the context of a complex household income portfolio.

Box 1: Selina, 38

Selina is a 38 year-old woman who lives with her husband, Babul (43) and their two daughters (aged 13 and 5) and one son (21). They live in a hilly area of Cox's Bazar district and their house is situated on the top of a small hill. Their eldest daughter (23) is married and lives separately. At the time of Selina's marriage (when she was 13 in 1982) her husband drove a cycle rickshaw and her father-in-law earned a living selling bamboo and trees. They owned no land apart from where their house stood. Her poor situation in the early years of their marriage was indicated by the fact that she could not eat three meals a day when she was first married and living with her in-laws; by her homelessness after they split from her in-laws in 1985; and by their inability to afford treatment for her son when he was seriously ill in 1989.

Selina's life trajectory (Figure 2) shows a gradual improvement in life conditions from a moderately poor childhood (level 2), slightly poorer early married life (level 2) to a less vulnerable 'medium' position (level 3) in recent years. The transition from 'poor' to a 'non-poor' status most likely occurred between the time Selina's husband began working as a truck driver in 1994 and when her son began earning income in 2004 from sharecropping, a power tiller business, and a grocery shop business. Selina was also economically active during these years supporting the household businesses by taking loans from NGOs such as BRAC and the Grameen Bank.

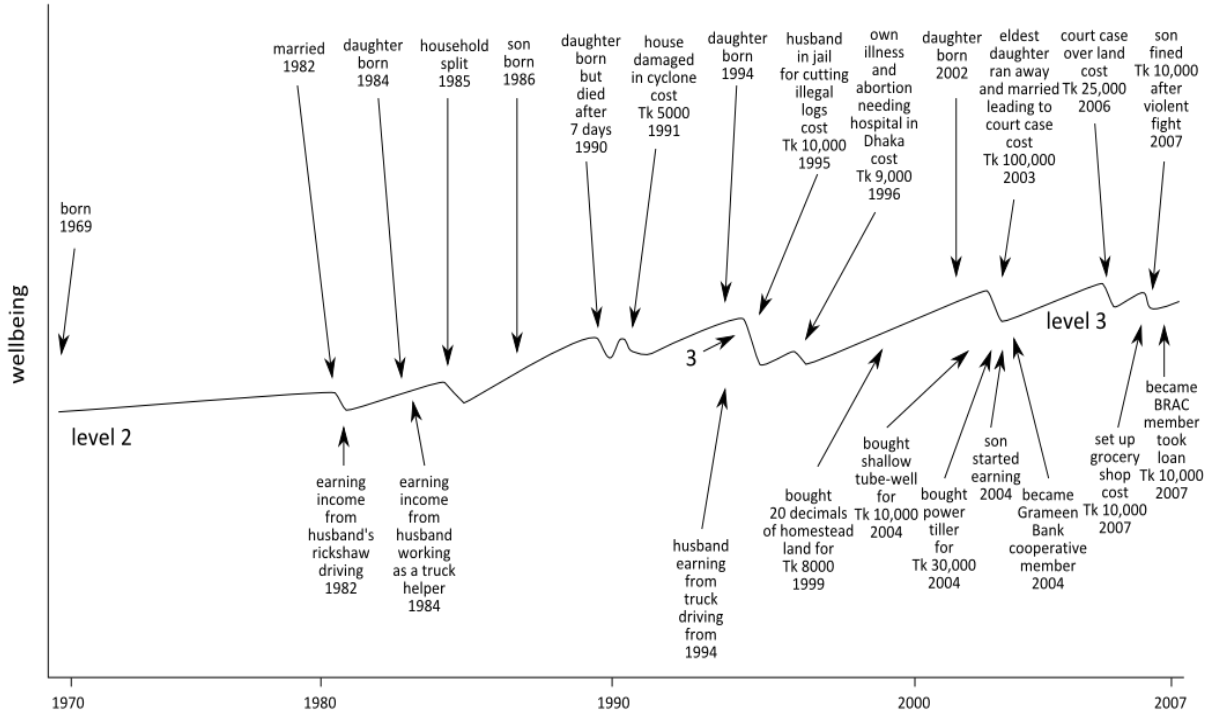
It should be noted that this slow improvement in life circumstances was not without setbacks. The most serious of these were problems with Selina's health, a baby who died in 1990, her husband's term in jail for illegal cutting of logs in 1995, and a number of court cases which cost them large amounts of money. These court cases were over the marriage of her eldest daughter in 2003, a dispute over a small plot of land they had bought in 2006, and a fight that her son got into over sharing irrigation water in a water scheme in 2007.

Selina's case illustrates how households are commonly supported by a range of income earning activities involving more than one family member. It also illustrates how household circumstances are often improved considerably when an additional income earner is added – in this case her son starting to contribute to household income through his business activities.



Figure 2: Selina: 38 year-old woman, Cox's Bazar District

Selina: 38 year-old woman
Cox's Bazar District



5.2 The accumulation of land assets

Of the 293 life histories, 113 or 39 per cent cited the accumulation of land as a significant source of life improvement. This category overlaps to some extent with other categories such as agriculture and fish farming (see 5.5 below) which often also reflects the benefits (protective and productive) of owning land. Also when land was inherited, the event was also categorised as ‘help from relatives or inheritance’ in my analysis.¹⁴

Habib’s life history depicted below (Figure 3) shows several causes of opportunity but also several events which caused downward pressures (illness, dowry, theft, fighting, crop damage and a train accident). However a gradual improvement in wellbeing occurred over the long-term, and this was supported by the accumulation of land assets by purchase and from inheritance.

¹⁴ See footnote 11 for a breakdown of types of land accumulation or use associated with this category.

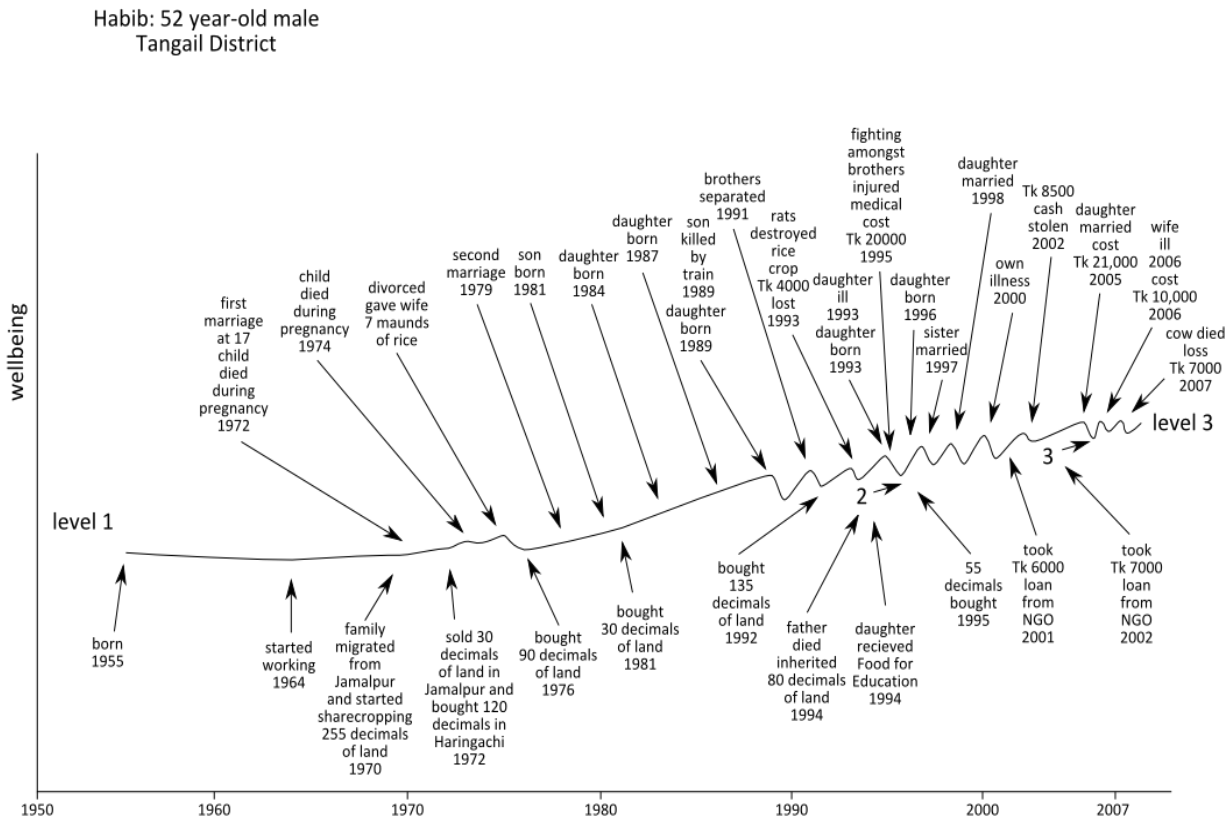
Box 2: Habib, 52

Habib was about 52 years old at the time of the interview in 2007. He was born in around 1955 in Jamalpur District to a relatively impoverished family. He is the oldest of eight children, five boys and three girls; the three girls being the youngest three children of the family. His father was a casual labourer, and owned one *bigha* (a third of an acre) of land. Habib spent the first 3 years of his working life tending cattle, earning a daily wage of around Tk 0.25, along with food. He then took work as a casual labourer, working for local landowners.

In 1970, when Habib was 15, the family relocated to Modhupur Upazila, in Tangail District, where land was considerably cheaper, in an effort to improve their financial position, selling their 30 decimals of land in Jamalpur for Tk 2,600. They were able to purchase a half share in 8.5 bighas of land in Tangail District for Tk 2,800. He now believes that the opportunity to purchase this land at such a good price was the beginning of his family's improving circumstances. After the war of independence in 1971, he stopped working for other landowners and began working with his father and brothers cultivating their own land. Habib was then able to purchase a further land: 90 decimals in 1976, 30 decimals in 1981, and 135 decimals in 1992 and 55 decimals in 1995. Added to this was 80 decimals he inherited from his father in 1994.

It was decided that he moved from level 2 to level 3, and therefore exited poverty, in around the period from 1994 to 1995. This corresponded with his inheriting of 80 decimals (0.8 of an acre) in 1994 and his buying a further 55 decimals of land in 1995. He funded the purchase of this land partly using loans and partly from the sale of goats and then repaid loans and bought livestock over an extended period from the proceeds of selling his crops.

Figure 3: Habib: 53 year-old man, Tangail District



Habib currently owns 8.5 bighas of land, including a homestead. His income arises from crops, rearing cows, goats, ducks and hens, and selling both fruit and timber from trees. He also has four bamboo clusters, which if sold could provide up to Tk 4,500 in a time of need. Habib's remaining two daughters still live with him and he will have to raise their dowries and wedding expenses. His wife also has ongoing medical problems which may incur further costs. However, with the accumulation of land assets over the long-term, he has moved from a very poor and vulnerable position in his childhood to a much more secure position now.

5.3 Livestock

In the total of 293 life histories, livestock appeared as a significant source of opportunity in 80 life histories (27 per cent). The majority of these were opportunities from cattle (67 life histories) followed by goats (19 life histories). Horses (5 life histories) and poultry (4 life histories) did not feature so strongly as significant sources of opportunity.

Livestock, and particularly cattle, are significant assets and cattle ownership was a very common step in paths of improvement involving the accumulation of even more valuable assets, such as land. Many stories of improvement show a pattern of small investment in livestock – starting with poultry or goats for example – which then allowed a larger investment – often in cattle – followed by the purchase of land. Cattle and land appeared as key resources: both assets are productive and feature strongly in stories of emergence from poverty. They are also important protective assets: they were often sold, and in the case of land there were a number of ways money was raised through mortgage arrangements – often with neighbours providing money in exchange for the use of the land for as long as the funds are not returned – or leasing land.

The life history of Khaleda (Figure 4) illustrates how livestock enterprises – in this case goat and cattle rearing – can be a key contributor to an exit from poverty.

Box 3: Khaleda, 50

Khaleda married into a large family in 1969, aged 12, in a fairly poor condition. In 1970 her father-in-law claimed that Khaleda's husband was not working hard enough and they were forced to form a separate household. At this time her situation declined with her husband dealing in kitchen vegetables, carrying produce by hand to sell in the nearest district town. At that time Khaleda also supported her husband by bringing food from her father's house.

Sometime between 1972, when her husband started rearing goats, and 1982, when they bought 11 bighas of land with money raised from goat and cattle rearing, her wellbeing level improved from level 2 to level 3. A significant point was also in 1974 when Khaleda's father gave them a cow and a goat. Recently (in 2005) they also inherited 33 decimals of land from her father-in-law and her sons have been working and contributing to household income. However it was livestock which allowed them to move out of poverty earlier in their married life.

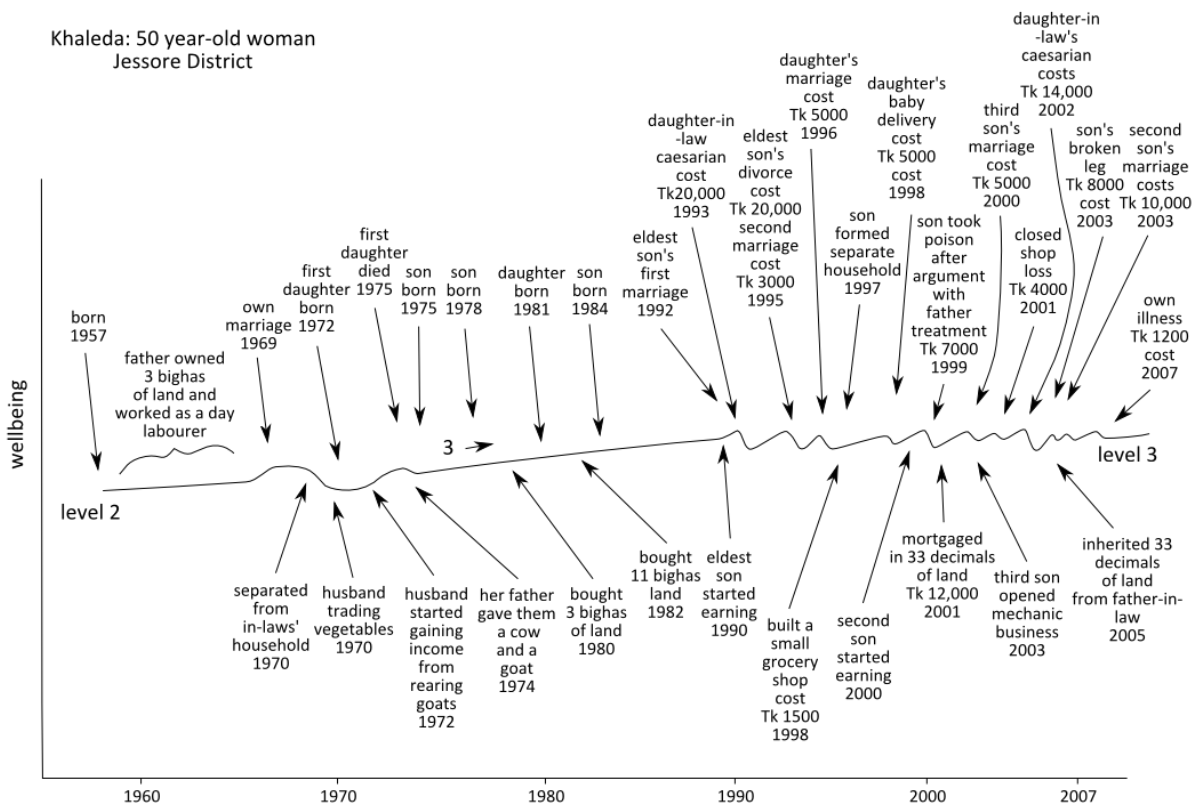
More recently, Khaleda and her husband have suffered health problems associated with older age, and their wellbeing is no longer improving. Also recently, they have suffered setbacks associated with their children – two of Khaleda's daughters-in-law have required caesarean operations with high costs borne by Khaleda and her husband, her eldest son was divorced with large legal costs and later took poison (with medical costs incurred) after an argument with his father, and her



youngest son had a serious road accident which also involved significant medical costs for the family.

Even so, throughout Khaleda's history, livestock rearing has supported an improving trajectory which has allowed purchase of land and a much more secure life. Additionally, at times of crisis they have been able to sell goats or cattle and mortgage land.

Figure 4: Khaleda: 50 year-old woman, Jessore District



5.4 Sons' or daughters' income

Of the 293 life histories, 71 (or 24 per cent) reported life-improving opportunities associated with children working and supporting the parent's household – either as part of the household or in the form of remittances sent from another place. These opportunities were almost exclusively from sons working. Only two life histories – a husband and wife from the same household – reported that their two daughters, who were working in a garments factory, provided them with one of three major life opportunities. There were numerous life histories where daughters were working (also commonly in the garments industry) but the contribution this made rarely translated into significant life improvements for their parents. The main reasons for this were that income-earning opportunities for young women in rural Bangladesh are still limited, with relatively low levels of remuneration, and rural women are

commonly married quite young – especially if they have left school – and because marriage patterns are patrilocal their income rarely contributes to their parents' households.

The contribution that sons' were making to parents' households was much more significant across the life histories. The jobs done ranged from day labour (e.g. agricultural, livestock, brick works, road works) to small businesses (e.g. rickshaw or van owner-driving, dealing in food or agricultural raw materials, running various kinds of shops, irrigation businesses, furniture making, tailoring) to salaried work in both private and public sectors (government departments, army, mills, presses and factories). A small number of sons were also employed overseas – mostly in the Middle East – sending remittances home.

The life history of Khaled (Figure 5) illustrates a movement out of poverty corresponding with the time when his sons began to work and contribute to his household income.

Box 4: Khaled, 70

Khaled is a 70 year-old man who lives with his wife (53), two sons and their wives and one grandson about 1.5 hours drive from Dhaka in Manikganj District.

Khaled grew up in a poor family and his father could not afford to send his children to school, so he received little formal education. His father cultivated the small amount of land that they owned and also cultivated other people's land as a sharecropper. As a young man Khaled worked with his older brothers dealing in unprocessed rice. Khaled's younger brother managed to go to school and his father later sold some land to pay the Tk 6000 bribe needed for this brother to get a salaried job working in a hospital. In 1970 Khaled's father died and in 1980 the brothers formed separate households.

From the 1980s, Khaled stopped dealing in rice and started dealing in sand – which he bought in Munchiganj and sold locally or in Dhaka for construction. He finished with this business in around 1993 and until the present time he cultivates his own land (36 decimals) and sharecrops other land (91 decimals).

In 1992, his elder son started working, aged 14 – first working as a mechanic for about a year and then learning tailoring and eventually running his own tailoring shop. From the life history interview it seemed that they moved from level two to level three at about this time, as a direct result of the added income from this son's work. In 2000 their younger son also started working in Chittagong in an aluminium factory and at the time of the interview was earning Tk 7000 per month and sending remittances home. A cousin helped him gain this employment.

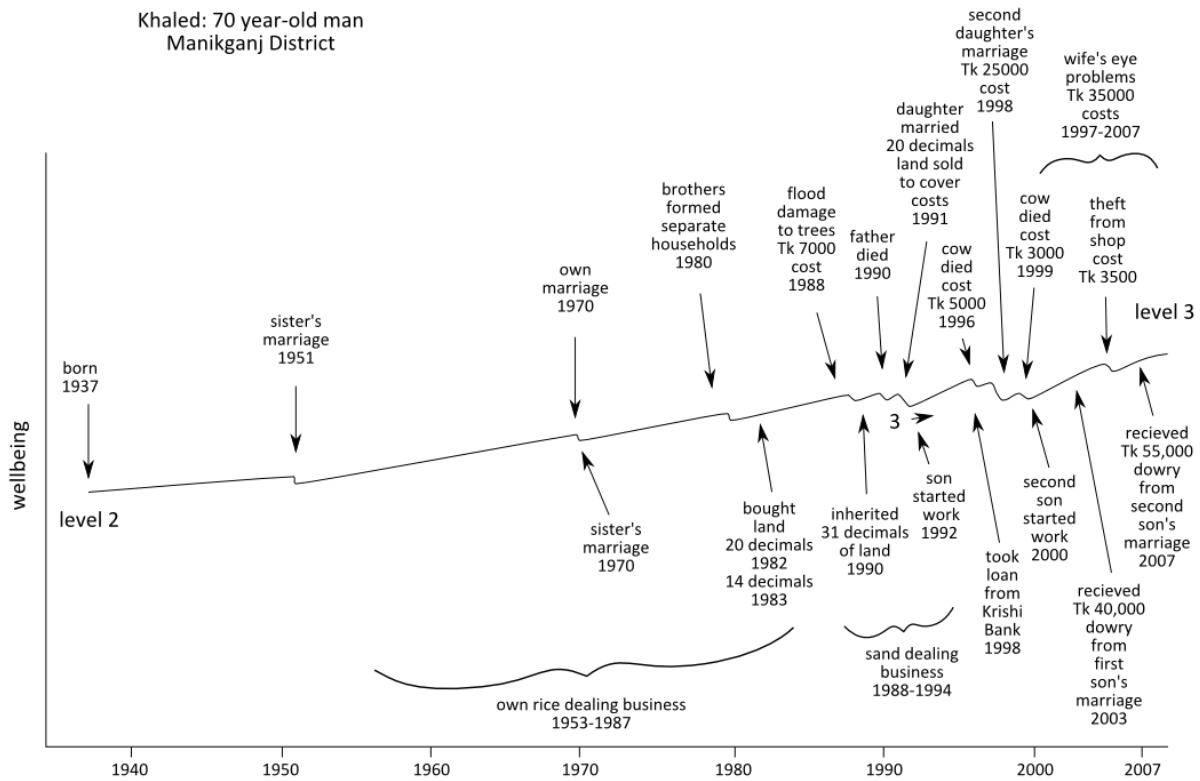
After his sons started working they also were able to benefit from dowry received: in 2003 they received a total of Tk 40,000 when Khaled's elder son was married, and in 2007 they received Tk 55,000 from his younger son's marriage. Some of this money was invested in the tailoring business and some set aside to use to send his younger son to work overseas sometime in the future – probably to the Middle East.

Khaled's life history illustrates a gradual improvement out of poverty, initially supported by his own work dealing in rice and sand, but with a significant boost provided when his two sons started working and contributing to the household. This has enabled Khaled to cope with downward pressures in the form of large dowries for his own two daughters – funded by selling land and taking an agricultural loan – and more recently the costs associated with



treating his wife's ongoing eye problems, caused by a medication mistake for a fever in 1997, which led to severe side effects resulting in her losing her sight.

Figure 5: Khaled: 70 year-old man, Manikganj District



5.5 Agriculture

Of the 293 life histories, 69 (23 per cent) had life-improving opportunities linked to agricultural enterprises. In addition, in 113 life histories 'land' was cited as a source of opportunity, which reflects land's investment and productive value.

Agriculture is a difficult category to delineate in rural Bangladesh as there are a wide variety of agricultural activities from arable crops (such as rice, jute, wheat and maize), a range of vegetables, fruit trees, pineapples, bamboo, spices, tree and flower nurseries. Livestock and fishponds are also often linked into this production system. Machinery associated with agriculture, such as threshing machines, power tillers and irrigation pumps can also provide an independent income in addition to their use on people's own land. There are also a wide variety of use and ownership arrangements of land from outright ownership, mortgage arrangements, leasing of land, and sharecropping of land, ponds and livestock.

The relatively high frequency of agriculture as a source of opportunity demonstrates the continuing importance of these varied forms of income sources for rural households. Additionally, these sources of income are often accompanied by the accumulation of assets such as land, livestock or machinery. As a result the stories of exit from poverty supported by agricultural enterprises, tend also to be stories of gradual accumulation of assets. These

stories generally show that hard work over the long term provides rewards, but the rewards are greater for those with initial resources to build on.

The life history of Monir (Figure 6) illustrates this commonly observed pattern of gradual asset accumulation supported by agricultural enterprises. Monir is a farmer from the north-western district of Nilphamari; his life history shows a trajectory of slow improvement and accumulation of assets over a long period, interrupted from time-to-time by crises and setbacks. Hard work coupled with prudent investment in land, livestock and improved agricultural technology helped Monir and his wife Bimola manage intermittent shocks without allowing these shocks to have a more damaging impact on their long term wellbeing. While Monir's circumstances were probably above the poverty line throughout his life, this pattern of agricultural income and asset accumulation is similar to those moving across the poverty line.

Box 5: Monir, 46

Monir was born in 1961 and had three brothers and two sisters. His father had a dried fish business (*shutki mache*) but also owned 15 bighas (5 acres) of land where he cultivated rice, jute and other crops. Monir had to leave school to help his father work on the land when he was about fifteen years old. His father had become ill and wasn't able to manage manual work so he asked Monir to leave school and help him. His father was about 57 years old then.

Monir got married to Bimola in 1979, when he was 18, without a large cash dowry. At the wedding Monir was given Tk 600 to purchase a bicycle, but instead he chose to buy a goat. He later sold the goat and bought a cow and reared it. For Monir, this marked the start of his accumulation of productive assets, which has continued since that time.

When Monir married, his father owned 20 bighas of land and they lived in an extended household with his parents and brothers. The brothers didn't form separate households until Monir's father died in 1988. From the time of his marriage, he and Bimola started to accumulate assets independently from Monir's father and brothers. The pattern of accumulation was from smaller livestock (goats and poultry) to larger livestock (cattle) and then to land. This is a similar pattern of accumulation that occurred in other interviews when people successfully moved away from poverty but still with a livelihood based on agricultural income.

In 1983, Monir purchased 3 decimals of land for Tk 350, mainly paid for by selling hens and goats reared by Bimola. Between his marriage and the death of his father (in 1988) Monir and Bimola bought 31 decimals of land. They mainly bought land, reared goats and cows and gave goats or cows to others to rear on a share a basis.¹⁵ Later Monir bought another 46 decimals of land for a total of Tk 13000.

In 1988, during a period of serious nationwide flooding, Monir's father died, aged 77. He had been diagnosed with a brain tumour and died following an operation. Monir had to raise Tk 31,000 to pay for his medical expenses. This money was raised by selling timber trees and a cow. Before his death, Monir's father had told Monir and his brothers to form separate households. Upon his death he left each son 11 *maunds* of paddy.

¹⁵ Share farming livestock (*borga*) is a common practice in rural Bangladesh and is also good way for poor people to be able to get into livestock rearing when they cannot afford to buy a whole animal. Usually the animal is shared 50:50, one party buys the animal, and the other feeds and houses it, and then any offspring is shared.

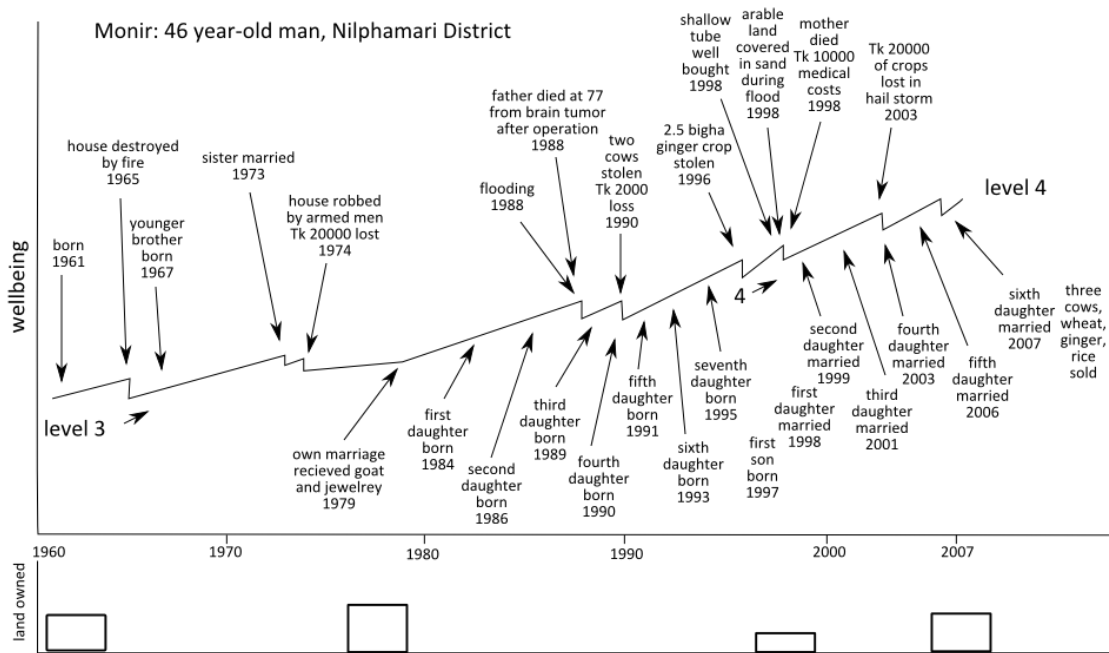


Also during the 1988 floods, *aman* paddy was damaged on four *bighas* of Monir's land, which resulted in a loss of crops with a value of approximately Tk 4000. This land was covered in sand from the flooding and since then these four bighas of riverbed land have been impossible to cultivate, until he started to cultivate two *bighas* from 2006. The other two *bighas* still have sand on them and are impossible to cultivate.

Monir concluded that 1988 was the worst crisis time – due to several calamities (his father's death, flooding and crop losses) occurring at the same time. In the year following the death of Monir's father, the family's 15 *bigha* homestead was divided and in Monir received 8 bighas. Since then Monir and Bimola have increased the amount of land they own to 16 bighas of land in 2007.

In 1996, the entire ginger crop from 2.5 bighas of land was stolen. The crop would have been worth about Tk 20,000. Monir also reflected at the end of the interview that this was the second most damaging incident, after the events of 1988. He considered that if this theft had not occurred he would have been able to buy more land and be in an even stronger position today.

Figure 6: Monir: 46 year-old man, Niphamari District



5.6 Salaried work

Of the 293 life histories, 42 (or 14 per cent) attributed significant life-improving opportunities to a household member or close family member gaining salaried work. Having salaried work in rural Bangladesh is usually referred to as having a *chakri*, sometimes literally translated as being 'in service'. The usual local distinctions are between having a relatively secure *chakri* on a monthly salary, less secure day labour (*din mojur*) paid at a daily rate, and being in business (*baebsha*).

The advantages of having salaried work are mainly in the regularity and security of income, but also other advantages such as having access to credit and savings in the form of salary advances or provident funds and pensions. Employers also act as patrons for their employees in asymmetric relationships which provide security in various forms for the employee in exchange for expected loyalty. The life history interviews show a wide range of salaried work and, when gained, it was commonly a source of long term benefit for the employee and his or her family.

These jobs included work in public services, such as the army, police, and electricity department; public owned mills and factories; work in private companies ranging from small printing presses to petrol pumps, brick factories to larger sugar mills; packaging companies to steel mills; and a range of other private factories making: garments, cigarettes, cosmetics, and biscuits. Research participants also had salaried jobs teaching in schools and madrassas, or working as guards and drivers. A small number also had salaried jobs working in Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

The life history of Rubel (Figure 7) illustrates the positive impact of having a salaried job in enabling escape from poverty and in building up assets in order to cope with a range of serious life crises when they arise. Salaried work acted as both an upward opportunity and a protective buffer. But there are hindrances to improvement, and risks associated with taking salaried work. In Rubel's case, his family is vulnerable because he lives away from home for six days of each week and spends only Fridays at home. As a result, his family has been subjected to various forms of harassment from local troublemakers, forcing him to arrange a quick marriage for his daughter and spend money on rescuing his son from kidnappers in 2007. However, even with the disadvantages associated with living away during the week to work in Dhaka, Rubel's ability to earn a salary and use the income to accumulate land, livestock, and irrigation assets has helped to sustain a long-term upward trajectory.

Box 6: Rubel, 47

Rubel is aged 47 and lives (some of the time) with his wife, Shireen (39), and one son (16), and a daughter (22) and granddaughter (1) in Manikganj District, about one and a half hours by road from Dhaka. Their daughter and granddaughter stay with them for eight months of each year, and stay the remaining four months in their daughter's husband's household. Their son is not married. Rubel works for a printing press in Dhaka and only returns home on Fridays, his one day off a week. Because of his work in Dhaka and slow accumulation of land, paid for from salary and farming, Rubel has been able to enjoy an improving quality of life since 1978, when he got the job in Dhaka. This continued through the mid 1980s when he separated from his brothers after his father's death.

In 1969, when Rubel was nine years old and in class five, his father was taken seriously ill, and was unable to work or even leave their house. In the absence of anybody who was able to support the family, Rubel pulled out of school and assumed the responsibility of working their land, going to the bazaar, organising people to plant and harvest their rice and other work. Rubel's older brother, who received no education, was working at a jute mill away from home which enabled him to send some money home but, his other brother could not help much due to learning difficulties. After several years of working on their land and also working as a day labourer, Rubel got a job at the printing press in Dhaka in 1978. During the period from 1978 to 1980, he was regularly able to earn extra money by working overtime, and his financial situation improved steadily.

By 1980, Rubel and his brothers had amassed sufficient funds between them, from Rubel's job in the printing press and his eldest brother's job at the mill, to pay off all the mortgages previously taken out by their father over the family's land. They also were able to buy a further three bighas of land from their uncle. However, the family's land lay near a river, and over a few years ending in 1983, all the land and the houses on it had been eroded away and lost to the river. This event led to a second decline in their lives.

Rubel himself fell seriously ill in 1987, suffering bleeding from his throat (caused by an ulcer), and as a result was unable to work for around 3½ months. The treatment cost in total around Tk 30,000 (including losses from not being able to work). He and his wife, Shireen, raised the money required by selling livestock (Tk 16,900), rice and some jewellery belonging to his wife (Tk 1,600), and by taking an advance on his wages (Tk 5,500) from the printing company. This illness caused great anxiety for Rubel, and he remembers it as the most stressful period in his life to date.

From 1987, Shireen joined an NGO cooperative (*shomiti*) and borrowed money which was used by Rubel to purchase one bigha of land. In 2000, Shireen joined a second cooperative to buy further land. Since this time, Shireen has taken loans nearly every year and they have bought land. The loans have been repaid by selling goats, shared cows and from Rubel's salary.

In 1997, they purchased a further 15 decimals of land, at a price of Tk 14,000, financing the purchase by selling two shared cows, and by Shireen taking out a loan of Tk 7,000 from an NGO. Rubel also ensured that his children were being educated, both son and daughter staying in school up to year seven.

In 2000, Rubel purchased a one fifth share in a shallow tubewell machine at a price of Tk 6,000. Two years later he bought out 2 of the other partners in the machine and later, he purchased the remaining 2 shares for Tk 6,000 giving him full ownership. During the same period, Shireen took a loan from an NGO of Tk 7,000 to purchase a sewing machine on behalf of their nephew. The nephew later repaid the cost of the sewing machine. Three years later, Rubel purchased a one thirteenth share of another shallow machine, at a price of Tk 7,000. This machine is still being used.

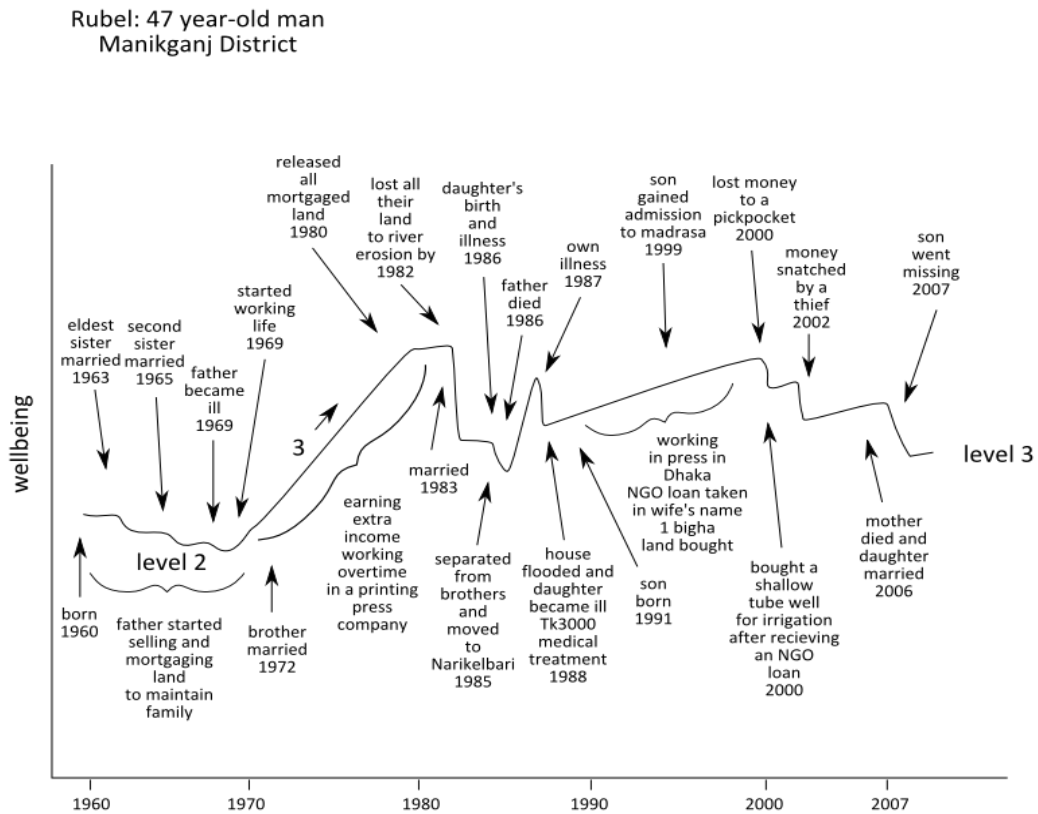
At this time they were growing very good rice crops (about 100 maunds from their land) and Rubel was still earning a salary in his printing job. A marriage was arranged for Rubel's daughter in 2006.



Rubel spent about Tk 10,000 to pay for the wedding costs but the agreed dowry is yet to be given as costs to send the groom to work overseas. After the wedding, one of the shallow machines was also given to her husband.

At the time of the interview, Rubel's only livestock holdings comprised 4 -5 hens, although he had previously owned cattle (one cow was given as part payment of the land he purchased in 1997). Rubel still works on the press in Dhaka, returning home each Friday to his family.

Figure 7. Rubel: 47 year-old man, Manikganj District



6 Discussion and implications

The analysis provides evidence that individuals showing a long-term improvement in wellbeing tend to exploit a limited set of opportunity types. The most frequently cited types of opportunity were, in order of frequency across the set of all life histories: rural farm and non-farm-related businesses (some supported by loans); accumulation and production of assets such as land and livestock, and income derived from them; remittances and support from sons' and (to a lesser extent) daughters' incomes; crop and fish production (also linked to land); and help from relatives, inheritance, or a favourable division of family assets.

However, the frequency of appearance of types of opportunity showed a slightly different pattern in life histories of individuals enjoying long-term wellbeing improvement, compared with people on trajectories of long-term wellbeing decline. People on improving trajectories more frequently reported sources of opportunity associated with accumulation of land assets, benefits from business activities, agriculture and fish farming, use of loans, salaried employment, livestock, household or property division.

In contrast, those on declining trajectories more often cited official social protection and development programmes, such as the Vulnerable Groups Development Programme, or the Primary Education Stipend, as sources of opportunity – suggesting that these official programmes may be effectively reaching those who need help, but tend to protect from decline, rather than lift people out of poverty. The declining group also cited the benefits of having a united family more often than those on improving trajectories. Opportunities associated with day labour, dowry receipt or favourable marriage, and sons and daughters working, did not show a marked difference in frequency of citation between those on improving or declining trajectories.

These findings support the view that work-related productive and asset-accumulating activities involving: land, businesses, agriculture, loans, livestock and salaried work, are doing the 'heavy lifting' of poverty reduction in rural Bangladesh, particularly for those with the resources and capabilities to exploit these routes out of poverty. Other forms of opportunity, such as official social protection programmes, seem to protect from further decline rather than function as a widespread cause of poverty exit.

The overall image of poverty reduction provided by household surveys can therefore be supplemented by life history interviews which provide a dynamic picture of how some people, with productive resources and capabilities (e.g. productive assets, skills, access to salaried employment, and business ability) are able to both exploit opportunities and cope with crises, and thus improve their lives. However, at the same time they leave behind people who lack those key resources and capabilities – thus generating the observed increases in inequality in rural Bangladesh.

For poverty reduction policy, the findings provide implications for action, as well as for ways of thinking. Productive interventions such as those around business activities, livestock, land ownership and production are likely to provide reductions in poverty, but unless these interventions enable productive assets to be transferred to the most vulnerable (represented by those on declining trajectories), it is likely they will help those already on improving

trajectories, more than the most vulnerable. The approach and findings also provide support for the view that the amelioration of common downward pressures, and particularly the downward pressures that affect those declining, will also make an important contribution to poverty reduction. However, the effectiveness of these interventions should not be assessed solely on how many people they lift across the national poverty line (the reduction in headcount poverty). Attention should also be paid to the impact on the depth of poverty and the protective role these interventions have in preventing further declines, even when a poverty exit is not achieved.

The learning derived from examining life history trajectories does not replace what can be learned from household surveys with much larger sample sizes. However, a detailed examination of individual life histories provides a unique view of the complex dynamics of socioeconomic mobility, and the way that a range of upward opportunities and downward pressures interact to create trajectories of wellbeing. This complements more quantitative variable-based approaches in informing poverty reduction policy.

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Appendix 1:

Main causes of poverty exit in each of 44 cases of poverty exit

household	sex	main cause
1	M	asset accumulation through successful farming, land purchase
2	F	sons working
	M	sons working
3	M	salaried work
4	M	cheese business, then land purchase
	F	cheese business, then land purchase
5	M	asset accumulation, non-farm business (shop)
	F	asset accumulation, non-farm business (shop)
6	F	asset accumulation, agriculture, day labour, business and livestock (childhood non-poor)
	M	asset accumulation through agriculture, day labour, business and livestock. Gained land as dowry.
7	M	dowry receipt, agriculture related business
	F	agriculture related business
8	M	dowry receipt, livestock, land purchase
	F	dowry receipt, livestock, land purchase
9	F	small business, sons working, NGO loan
	M	sons working, small business, NGO loan
10	M	sons working, NGO loan, livestock
	F	livestock, land purchase (NGO loan)
11	F	dowry land, household separation
	M	national migration, land purchase, agriculture
12	M	salaried work, NGO loan
	F	marriage, husband's salaried work
13	M	small rural business and agriculture
	F	small rural business and agriculture
14	M	rural businesses
15	F	marriage and husband's rural businesses
	F	timber business and horse cart
16	M	inherited land, shallow machine, son's job in madrassa
17	F	power tiller, inherited land, sons' work and business
18	F	land inheritance, business, son's dowry, trees and crops, one son's salaried work in Chittagong, one son's tailoring business
	M	land inheritance, business, son's dowry, trees and crops, one son's salaried work in Chittagong, one son's tailoring business
19	M	son's salaried work, land inheritance, livestock, agriculture
	F	son's salaried work, land inheritance, livestock, agriculture
20	F	jute business, agriculture, sons' agricultural work
	M	jute business, agriculture, sons' agricultural work
21	F	land accumulation, livestock, sons' income
22	F	business, son's income, livestock, trees
23	M	income from truck driving, grocery shop, shallow machine, power tiller
	F	income from truck driving, grocery shop, shallow machine, power tiller
24	F	goat business, livestock – land purchase, land inheritance,
25	M	agriculture, livestock
	F	agriculture, livestock
26	F	marriage, land inheritance, livestock
27	M	agriculture, land purchase, rural business – wife married down



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