

# CLP'S EXPERIENCE IN MEASURING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

## SUMMARY

After operating from 2004 – 2016, the Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) accumulated vast experience working with the extreme-poor and in remote areas.

During its final year the CLP developed a series of Lessons Learnt briefs with donors and development practitioners in mind.

This brief is one in a series and shares many lessons and suggestions for those grappling with measuring women's empowerment.



## LESSONS INCLUDE:



Getting the community involved in defining women's empowerment results in a defensible approach.



Use mixed methods to collect data.



Recognise that the definition of women's empowerment is context specific and likely to change over time.



Account for the possibility that respondents will tell you what they think you want to know.



Acknowledge the risk that questions can be interpreted in different ways.



Even some obvious things can be overlooked.

## BACKGROUND

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) was a poverty reduction programme implemented in Bangladesh and co-financed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). It was managed by Maxwell Stamp PLC and sponsored by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (MLGRD&C) and executed by the Rural Development and Cooperatives Division (RDCD) of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

People on the riverine islands ("chars") of north-west Bangladesh had precarious livelihoods. They were often heavily reliant on low-paid and unpredictable agricultural day labour, and there were few other stable livelihoods options open to them. They were vulnerable to environmental shocks that could have devastating effects on their livelihoods, with flooding a particular risk. Most chars-dwellers moved home several times in the last few years due to floods or char erosion. Many reported that they had lost all their possessions and assets at least once in the past.

The precariousness of their livelihoods meant that many chars households faced food insecurity and suffered from the effects of under-nutrition. Limited access to improved water sources and sanitation and low levels of services such as health, education and livelihoods support were further challenges, resulting in chars-dwellers being amongst the poorest people in Bangladesh. CLP aimed to work with these people to help them lift themselves out of poverty.

CLP operated in two phases – CLP1, from 2004 to 2010, and CLP2, from April 2010 to March 2016. Over that time, CLP accumulated substantial experience from working with the extreme-poor in remote areas.

CLP is widely recognised as having been a very successful programme. By the end of its tenure, CLP directly (and in many cases dramatically) transformed the lives of over 78,000 core participant households, and it improved the livelihoods of one million poor and vulnerable people. Moreover, it achieved this while operating in one of the most challenging environments in the world: the riverine island chars in the Jamuna, Teesta, and Padma rivers of north-western Bangladesh.

During the course of its implementation, CLP needed to undergo a number of major changes, to respond to a range of new challenges, and to test out a variety of approaches. It involved itself in many different activities, spanning everything from livelihood improvement to market development, from social protection to land reform, from education to nutrition, and from health to veterinary services. Over the years it operated, CLP learnt a number of very important lessons. These lessons are now documented in a series of Lessons Learnt briefs which are intended to share CLP's experience with donors and practitioners, both in Bangladesh and further afield.

This particular brief focuses on lessons learnt from measuring women's empowerment.

## CLP'S INNOVATION, MONITORING, LEARNING AND COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION

CLP monitored progress of its core participant households (CPHHS) against criteria that could be grouped under six thematic areas 1) Graduation 2) Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 3) Livelihoods 4) Nutrition 5) Food Security, and 6) Women's Empowerment.

Finding tools to measure women's empowerment proved both interesting and challenging. The first rounds of surveys conducted on behalf of CLP revealed a number of ineffective or inadequate techniques for gathering data related to women's empowerment, either in the survey instrument itself or in the indicators being measured. By grappling with these issues and seeking alternatives CLP developed an approach that generated interest both locally and abroad and has, in some instances, been replicated by other projects and programmes.

This brief does not intend to replicate information already contained on the CLP website ([www.clp-bangladesh.org](http://www.clp-bangladesh.org)) which explains in detail how CLP developed an innovative approach to tracking women's empowerment along with the key findings. Instead, this brief focuses on key lessons learnt from developing and applying the approach.





## MONITORING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT TIMELINE

The following timeline presents significant events in the process of developing tools for measuring women's empowerment:

**March 2010**  
CLP2 begins



**June 2010**  
First empowerment survey.  
Very detailed questionnaire  
(Baseline for Cohort 2.1)



**October 2010**  
Second empowerment survey.  
Very detailed questionnaire.  
(Baseline for Cohort 2.2)



**April-June 2012**  
Review of the approach to measure  
women's empowerment. This helped  
to define a new approach  
to measuring women's empowerment



**June-August 2012**  
First survey using the Chars  
Empowerment Scorecard  
(CLP1 and Cohort 2.3  
and 2.3 control group).



**August 2014**  
Review of the relationship  
between women having their  
own income and other  
indicators of empowerment.



## LESSONS LEARNT

The Programme's interventions were designed to build women's confidence, address negative social attitudes and behaviours, and increase respect from family members and the wider community. Activities that aimed to achieve this included the provision of an income-generating asset coupled with livelihoods training. CLP also enrolled women in social development groups and provided couples-orientation courses as well as workshops for influential males in the community.

### GET THE COMMUNITY INVOLVED TO HELP DEFINE INDICATORS

During the first few months of CLP2 it became clear that the Programme needed to assess the extent to which it was empowering women on the chars. The donors were asking for information and the Programme's Logical Framework only contained an indicator related to women's self-confidence. However, self-confidence did not adequately capture the full range of indicators that contribute to women's empowerment and it was determined that some form of data collection was necessary.

In 2010, CLP's Innovation, Monitoring, Learning and Communications Division (IMLC) began by studying the literature and investigating what other projects and programmes were doing to monitor women's empowerment. This resulted in the development of the first empowerment survey questionnaire of approximately 200 questions. However, it was found that at the end of the interview there was no real way of knowing if the respondent was empowered or not; it was too subjective. Administering the questionnaire was not only time consuming but also, because of its length, respondents often failed to complete it. In addition, it soon became clear that the indicators being used were based on CLP's understanding of women's empowerment and not on criteria that the respondents considered important.

Two years later, between April and June 2012, dissatisfied with the existing approach, IMLC undertook a review of

### WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT SCORECARD

This scorecard shows the behaviour which people on the chars have identified as representing empowerment. The CLP uses these ten criteria for monitoring its impact on women's empowerment.

how CLP measured women's empowerment. The process enabled a greater appreciation for the fact that women's empowerment is context-specific and that char households should be consulted to see how they define women's empowerment.

As part of this review, IMLC launched a significant piece of research, the objective of which was to understand how char households defined women's empowerment. This entailed many focus group discussions with women and men of different ages and from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The research, qualitative in nature, resulted in the Chars Empowerment Scorecard (CES), which comprises ten criteria or indicators. A relatively simple and short questionnaire was developed to answer the indicators in the Scorecard. A respondent was said to be empowered if she met any five or more of the criteria. The first survey to use the CES took place from June to August 2012.

Indicators for the Scorecard were separated into two categories: household-level indicators and community-level indicators. The household-level indicators referred to a woman's status within her home and the dynamics of power between husband and wife. They also related to the influence and control a woman has within the household. The community-level indicators related to a woman's social status, including her participation and influence within the community, as well as the respect she receives from community members.

By following a very consultative process, CLP was not only able to better understand what women's empowerment meant in the chars context, but also, because of the extensive conversations held with char households, the Programme had a very defensible position when questioned why certain criteria were used as opposed to others.







### USE MIXED METHODS TO COLLECT DATA

Ideally, when it comes to describing and measuring women's empowerment, a mixture of methods – both qualitative and quantitative – is best for determining indicators and gathering data. Sufficient field research, including focus group discussions, helped in building accuracy and legitimacy for the quantitative survey, which the CES and its questionnaire became.

The final product developed by CLP – the Chars Empowerment Scorecard – was the result of a qualitative approach that was used to construct a survey-based questionnaire. The two approaches supplemented each other well and resulted in a deeper understanding of women's empowerment.

In the end, it incorporated some of the questions from the original survey but, despite that survey containing 200+ questions, there were still some important omissions. Analyses from the first surveys using the Chars Empowerment Scorecard showed some interesting results, but the data couldn't explain, for example 1) which aspects of the Programme were influencing women's empowerment the most, or 2) to what extent having an independent income impacted on other criteria of women's empowerment. It was only by using a combination of data analysis and further qualitative research that CLP came to understand this.

## **THE DEFINITION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IS CONTEXT SPECIFIC AND LIKELY TO CHANGE OVER TIME**

It was a fairly obvious, but late realisation, that empowerment is highly context specific. Even within Bangladesh, the criteria used to define empowerment are likely to be different for women living on the chars compared, for example, to women living in urban slums.

Had CLP realised this earlier, a questionnaire with 200+ questions (CLP's first approach) that drew on what other Bangladesh projects and programmes working in different environments were using probably wouldn't have been developed.

But, just as the criteria used to define empowerment are context specific, so too are the criteria likely to change as a woman makes economic and social progress. For example, the criteria used to define women's empowerment for an extreme-poor woman just entering the Programme was likely to be different from those of a woman who had received support for several years, and who subsequently had significant assets and a greater role in household decision making.

CLP did not have the resources to assess the extent to which criteria would change over time. And, there was hesitation to change any of the survey criteria because each change would affect the degree to which the survey could present a clear set of time-series data. In future, those who design such surveys should keep this in mind.

## **THERE IS A RISK OF SURVEY/RESPONDENT BIAS**

Each year of operation, IMLC carried out an annual survey during which a sample of households that were supported in the past were revisited, i.e. panel samples. The advantage of this approach (as opposed to randomly selecting a different sample each year) was that it allowed the status of individual households, and respondents, to be tracked over time. A disadvantage of this approach, however, was that the same households were revisited and may have started providing the information they thought the enumerator wanted to hear.

Another risk associated with the CES questionnaire was that questions could potentially be interpreted in different ways. For example, to some women "influencing decisions regarding investment" actually meant they were making or changing a particular decision; whereas for other women, it was simply about the fact that the man listened when in the past he hadn't.

The same type of confusion could also have arisen for the "making decisions in the household jointly" indicator. Some women meant that they discussed decisions and took decisions upon mutual agreement, while for other women this meant that the man included them in the decision-making process when in the past he hadn't. Both can be argued to represent empowerment, but

there's at least a qualitative difference between the two, even if they represent the empowerment definition. These are not unusual risks. And they are present in all such surveys.

## **EVEN SOME OBVIOUS THINGS CAN BE OVERLOOKED**

After going through the extensive community consultation process and finally developing the CES, IMLC launched its first CES survey to assess levels of empowerment in June 2012.

It wasn't until the analysis stage that CLP realised that female-headed households had been included in the sample and that not all criteria actually applied to them, e.g. 1) having her own cash 2) keeping the family's cash etc. These female-headed households were included in the analysis, and it was actually easier for them to meet five or more of the criteria than male-headed households. During the second CES survey the authors decided to follow a slightly different approach and excluded the female-headed households from the analysis for these specific indicators. For these female-headed households (admittedly a small proportion of the sample at +/-12%) the community indicators of empowerment were, however, relevant.

It's clearly important to think the whole process through, from start to finish.

If you wish to learn more about the CLP or the lessons learnt series of briefs please visit the CLP website [www.clp-bangladesh.org](http://www.clp-bangladesh.org).

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