

Empowering women on the chars: increasing resilience to disasters and building sustainable livelihoods

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Abstract

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP)'s response has been to provide a comprehensive package of support which aims to increase resilience to disasters and build women's empowerment. In 2012, CLP developed an innovative approach to monitor women's empowerment. Understanding that empowerment is context specific, CLP used qualitative approaches to understand how *char* households define empowerment. From this research CLP developed a set of ten (community and household level) indicators; making up the Chars Empowerment Scorecard. Results show that CLP has a considerable impact on women's empowerment. They also show that CLP has impacts at both the household and community-level, driven by two main factors: increased knowledge (through Social Development training) and increased wealth (through CLP's Asset Transfer Project). Further, impacts on empowerment are seen to occur relatively quickly and sustain over time. The effects of climate change are only likely to further compound problems for *char*-dwellers. By increasing women's empowerment, CLP is confident they will be better able to build sustainable livelihoods and increase their resilience to future disasters.

Keywords: *Gender, Empowerment, Livelihoods, Sustainability, Bangladesh*

1. Introduction

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) began in 2004 and enrolled 55,000 core participant households (CPHHs) living on island *chars* (riverine islands) in North West Bangladesh out of extreme poverty. In its current phase (2010-2016) CLP works to lift 78,000 CPHHs. *Char* HH's are confronted by a range of seasonal shocks and constraints imposed by their geography. CLP works with extreme poor households living on island *chars* in North West Bangladesh. It aims to improve the livelihoods, incomes and food security of at least one million poor and vulnerable women, children and men living on the *chars*. The CLP provides a comprehensive package of interventions to its core participant households (CPHHs). A number of interventions also benefit the wider community. The main objectives of the programme are to improve social and economic assets, reduce environmental and economic risk and increase access to markets and services.

Chars Livelihoods Programme improves women empowerment and the disaster resilience of households through a variety of its livelihoods activities [1] [2]. Through the infrastructure projects households get support in three ways: raising of the house on a plinth two feet (60cm) above the highest known flood level; providing access to sanitary latrines; and providing access to improved water sources through tube wells. Each of these interventions reduces the vulnerability of households to hazards. Households are safer on a raised plinth, giving protection also to cattle and homestead gardens. The CLP sanitary latrines and tube wells are also raised two feet above the highest known flood level reducing the practice of open defecation and giving continuous access to improved water sources even during floods [3] [4]. CLP Asset Transfer Project is the cornerstone of the CLP's model of poverty reduction. The programme rests on the assumption that the support package provided to core participant households is sufficient to help graduate households out of extreme poverty [5]. The initial 'primary' asset transferred to the participant through the asset transfer project is conceived as the starting point for a continuous process of asset growth. This asset chosen is most often cattle (98%) [6]. The type of cattle that are found on the *chars* are very resistant to hazards as they can swim well and are able to be kept on plinths for long periods of time [7]. CLP provides health and nutrition supports through community level service delivery and volunteer development. CLP also Introduces Markets for poor (M4P) approach and strengthening linkage between *char* and mainland to create Enabling markets. While on the CLP support package, participants attend Social Development group meetings for the entire 18 month period. At these meetings participants are taught a variety of modules including disaster preparedness. This covers multiple hazards including floods, cyclones and fires. These meetings along with other CLP organised meetings (Village Development Committees (VDCs); Adolescent Groups; Couples Orientation; and Men's Training) increase social capital, creating stronger links within villages, allowing for a better coordinated response to disasters. Another group meeting that is organised by the CLP is the Village Savings and Loans Groups (VSLGs). These provide households not only with access to microcredit in times of need but also with a way of saving money for when shocks occur.



Project interventions affect outcomes in different ways. In terms of female empowerment, the assumption is that interventions including training, couples's orientation sessions, and transferring assets to the female head of the household can and do have an impact. To understand which behaviors show them that a woman in this context is empowered as well as the impact of CLP activities on the women empowerments [8] conducted a study in 2012 on The CLP's impact on women's empowerment.

Disaster Risk Reduction, Resilience and Climate Change are all concepts which are mentioned within CLP documents. The CLP addresses certain aspects of these issues and the programme is a clear example of how Livelihood projects build up disaster resilience. [9] conducted a study in 2014 on 'Impact of the Chars Livelihoods Programme on the Disaster Resilience of Chars Communities' to measure the impact that CLP has had on the disaster resilience of communities.

The present paper is the combination of above two studies which object is to know how increasing the resilience to disasters of char people and building women's empowerment.

2. Materials and Methods

In case of CLP's impact on women's empowerment research where introduced a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. A questionnaire, or empowerment scorecard, was administered on a panel sample of CLP-1 and CLP-2 households (cohort 2.3 and the control group for cohort 2.3. CLP-2 will support 78,000 CPHHs through six annual groups, or cohorts). Additional field research was undertaken through focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews to gain a deeper understanding and to know 'how and why' the CLP impacts or does not impact female empowerment. The empowerment scorecard comprises ten criteria, defined by the community, and is used to assess the level of female empowerment. If the respondent achieves a criteria, she receives one point. Conversely she receives no points if she does not achieve the criteria. Indicators have no intermediate point between achievement and non-achievement; a woman cannot half-achieve a criteria. To define whether a woman is empowered or non-empowered, CLP introduced a cut-off point of 5. The logic for assigning the cut off at 5 (rather than, for example, 7) was that this is the threshold at which the majority of control group households were categorized as not empowered.

In case of 'Impact of the Chars Livelihoods Programme on the Disaster Resilience of Chars Communities study' a mixed method with a concurrent nested design. Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires and then a score card was created. Key Informant Interviews were then performed to collect qualitative data to understand the findings from the survey. Questionnaires were created covering four main themes that make up a disaster-resilient community: Disaster Preparedness and response; Knowledge and Education; Risk Assessment and Governance. To create the questionnaires on the disaster resilience themes, certain components of resilience were selected and questions were created to be answered by the household. The questionnaires were carried out within all six cohorts. Because cohort 2.6 has not been supported yet by CLP, they acted as the control for the study. Information was collected from CLP Implementing Organizations (MOs) about the frequency of flooding, erosion and other hazards. This meant that the total sample was 280 (240 CLP-supported and 40 control). The resilience of different cohorts were then compared as well as with a control. Disaster resilience scoring of women and men was also compared. The present study is designed with the combination of above two studies. Both the studies were conducted in different cohorts and areas which has been mentioned in Table-1 and Table-2.

The women empowerments study was conducted as per Table-1..

Cohort	Number of households	District
CLP 1	650	Bogra, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Kurigram, Sirajganj
Cohort 2.3	424	Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Pabna, Rangpur, Tangail
Control for cohort 2.3	500	Jamalpur, Pabna, Rangpur, Tangail

Table 1- Sample size according to cohort and areas for the women empowerment study.

The Impact study of the Chars Livelihoods Programme on the Disaster Resilience of Chars Communities was conducted as per below Table 2.

Cohort	District	Upazilla	Village
2.1	Kurigram	Chilmari	Natar Kandi, Modafot Kalikapur
2.2	Kurigram	Kurigram Sadar	Khaser Char, Nayar Hat
2.3	Kurigram	Ulipur	Berahim, Uttar Baladoba
2.4	Kurigram	Nageswari	Char Pattala, Dohinirampur Uttor
2.5	Kurigram	Nageswari	Poshchim Balar Hat, Konnamoti
2.6	Tangail	Bhunpur	Sosua, Gobinda Pur

Table 2 – Cohort wise areas for study on Disaster Resilience of Chars Communities

3. Results and Discussions

In case of women empowerment study ten criteria that community has identified through Focus group discussion as most important for determining whether a women is empowered and that is char empowerment scorecard (Figure 1).

The figure 2 and 3 are shown that CLP has a substantial impact on women's empowerment. The findings are unambiguous; receipt of the CLP package has a considerable effect on a women's level of empowerment. Both the mean empowerment score and the percentage of women empowered in each strata show large improvements in households which have received or are receiving the CLP package, in comparison to those which have not. A woman who has received the CLP package is six times more likely to be empowered than a woman living in extreme poverty who has never received CLP support.

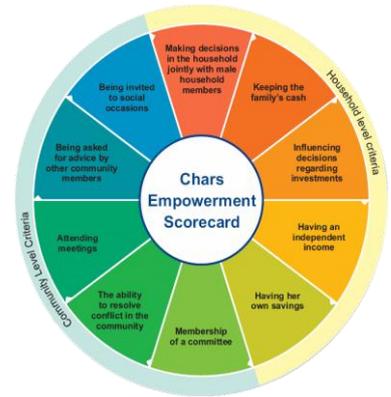


Figure 1- Women Empowerment Score card

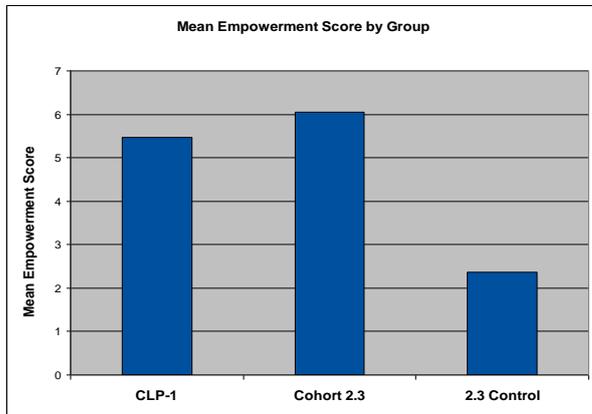


Figure 2: Mean Empowerment Score by Group

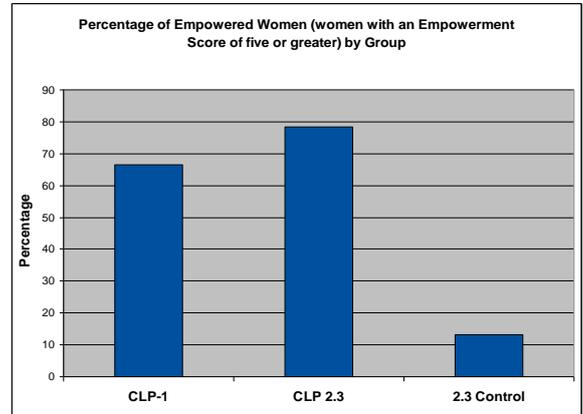


Figure 3: Percentage of Women Empowered by Group

As shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5, the CLP has more impact on some indicators of empowerment than others. At the community level, it has a large impact on women's ability to provide advice, ability to solve community conflict, invitations to social occasions and meeting attendance. The programme has a smaller impact on committee membership, perhaps because this is a more difficult criteria to meet; participants may need more time to achieve this criteria.

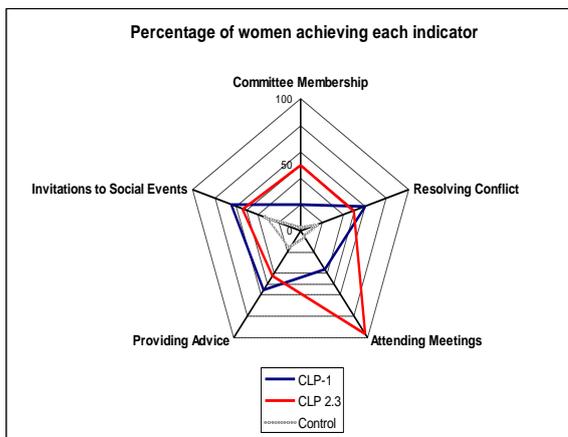


Figure 4 - Percentage of women achieving each community level indicator ore by Group

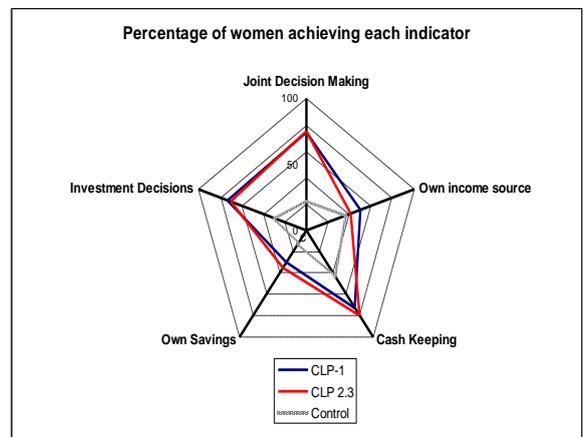


Figure 5 - Percentage of women achieving each household level indicator ore by Group

It is found in SHOHARDO Programme that through implementation of different interventions the percentage of women reported that they participate in various types of decisions rose sharply in several categories during the course of its first programme. Increase of buying or selling major household asset (land, livestock, crop) has increased from the baseline 23.5% to 48.8%, increase of active participation and involvement in local courts has increased from the baseline 10.1% to 40.4% [10]. In another study it is shown that 40% had poor level of empowerment, 9% had fair and 41% had good level of women empowerment [11]. The results of both study is supportive with this present study.

In case of the Impact of the CLP on the Disaster Resilience of Chars Communities study the following figure 6 was created showing the disaster resilience of households which have been supported by the CLP compared to the control group which has had no intervention. It can be seen that in all four thematic areas the intervention group scores higher than the control. Disaster resilience is at a similar level in each of the four theme areas except with the Disaster Preparedness and Response, intervention communities scored slightly greater and the Risk Assessment score of the control group communities was significantly lower. This shows quantitatively that the interventions that CLP are carrying out on the *chars* are significantly improving the disaster resilience of communities on the chars.

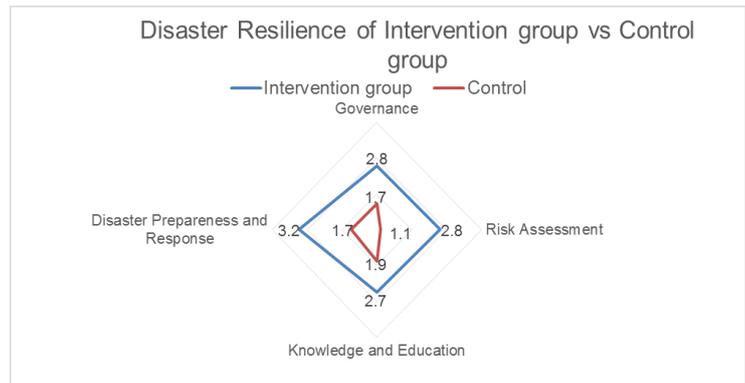


Figure 6: Disaster Resilience of Intervention Group vs Control

When male and female were compared the following two diamonds (figure 7) were created. As can be seen in the graphs in the intervention group, women have greater resilience than men whereas in the control group the men have marginally more resilience than women. This shows that not only has CLP improved the resilience of the community but also empowered women in the process.



Figure 7 - Disaster resilience of men and women in different groups

It is found in a report that through the soft activities like awareness raising, community mobilization, risk assessment advocacy and capacity building have significant impact in the community increase of disaster resilience and respond [12] which is related with the present study.

4. Conclusions

Women who have received the CLP package is six times more likely to be empowered than women living in extreme poverty who have never received CLP support. Meaning is that level women's confidence in individual level and acceptance in family as well as in the community level will be increased. The interventions that CLP are carrying out on the *chars* are significantly improving the disaster resilience of communities on the chars which may result to increase the coping capacity from shocks and stresses.

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