

Background to the Chars Livelihoods Programme

The Chars

Chars are river islands created by the action of the mighty rivers of Bangladesh. As the waters pour across the land, they deposit silt and mud along their course, creating new islands. Often flat and fertile, some are perfect for farming. People quickly move to take advantage of these gifts from the rivers.



But the apparent generosity comes at a cost. Even as a new farm rises from the deluge, there will be another household desperately trying to save their home, their cattle and their crops as the river swiftly erodes their *char*. What the river brings, it also takes away.

Even if the *char* is not entirely eroded, annual flooding can partially or completely submerge it. This may drown people's crops, ruin their possessions or destroy their tube-wells and latrines. At the very least, they will have to find somewhere else to live for a while.



The *chars* in the north-west are located in some of the most isolated and impoverished areas in the country. People on the *chars* are heavily reliant on low-paid and unpredictable day labour for their livelihoods. They are typically food insecure and suffer from under-nutrition. People living here are therefore highly vulnerable to environmental shocks that can have devastating effects on their livelihoods.

The CLP

The *Chars Livelihoods Programme* (CLP) is a livelihoods programme which aims to substantially reduce extreme poverty on the *chars* in North-Western Bangladesh. It provides a comprehensive package of support to the extremely poor, as well as extending support to the wider *char* community.



The CLP is jointly funded by UKaid through the Department for International Development (DFID) and by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). It is sponsored by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRD&C) of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. It is executed by the Rural Development and Cooperative Division (RDCD) and is managed through Maxwell Stamp PLC.

Progress during CLP's first phase

The first phase of the CLP (CLP-1) ran between 2004 and 2010. It worked on the *chars* of the Jamuna River in the districts of Kurigram, Bogra, Gaibandha,

Sirajganj and Jamalpur. CLP-1 supported 55,000 of the poorest households and is estimated to have benefited more than 900,000 people.



Objectives under CLP-2

CLP-2 began in April 2010 and follows on from CLP-1, but with a redefined working area. CLP-2 will continue to work in Kurigram, Gaibandha and Jamalpur, as well as the new districts of Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Pabna and Tangail. CLP-2 will run until 2016 with the aim of lifting another 67,000 households out of extreme poverty.

Selection Criteria

The CLP uses a rigorously-applied set of selection criteria. To be eligible for the programme, households must:

- have been living for at least six months on an island *char*
- have no ownership or access to land
- have no regular source of income
- not own more than two goats or sheep; ten fowl; or one shared cow
- not have an outstanding loan from a micro-finance institute
- not be receiving cash or asset grants from another programme
- be willing to attend weekly group meetings for a period of 18 months

The wider char community also benefits from the programme's activities. These include access to health and family planning services, village savings and loans groups, training on social issues, cash-for-work and market development activities, among others.



The CLP Core Package

The CLP core package is provided to participants for 18 months. The cornerstone of the programme is the provision of an asset that can generate income. Households are able to use the initial asset to gradually accumulate further income-generating assets, typically livestock and land. These provide diversified incomes for participants, decrease their reliance on day labour, and provide greater resilience to shocks.



However, there is more to poverty than incomes and livelihoods. The CLP package therefore addresses a wider range of issues, such as water and sanitation, empowerment of women, health and nutrition, village savings and loans, raising awareness on social issues such as dowry and early marriage, flood protection and access to market development services.

Building Livelihoods and Assets

The central element of the CLP model is the provision of an asset of the household's choice, worth Tk. 16,500 (about £137). The CLP does not prescribe what the household should purchase, only requiring



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that it must be able to generate an income. The vast majority of participants (98%) select cattle as their asset.

These cattle can provide milk or meat for the family to consume or sell, and also give birth to calves that can be sold or raised to increase the household's asset base. Once households have accumulated a small herd of cattle, they frequently diversify their livelihoods by leasing land to produce crops.

The programme also provides households with a monthly stipend to prevent distress sales of the cattle. Viewing the cattle as an investment, they are more likely to keep it until it is profitable and can become the basis of a sustainable livelihood.

Providing Water and Sanitation

People on the *chars* rarely have access to good quality water or adequate sanitation and typically have poor hygiene practices. Improving water, sanitation and hygiene are essential components of the CLP, as they have an over-arching effect on nutrition and food security.



The core package provides subsidies to participant households to install improved water sources. It also provides subsidies to all village households to construct sanitary latrines, whether or not they are receiving the core package of assistance. Alongside this infrastructure, the programme carries out capacity-building to encourage hand-washing and eliminate open defecation in char villages.

Supporting Health and Nutrition

The programme works to address health, hygiene, family planning and nutritional needs of people on the *chars*. The major health problems in the CLP's working villages are diarrhoeal diseases, dysentery, skin diseases, hepatitis and parasites.



In order to combat these health problems, the CLP operates fortnightly clinics and trains village health workers. In addition to providing a wide range of primary healthcare and family planning services, it provides deworming tablets and micronutrient supplements to children and refers serious or complicated cases to health facilities on the mainland. Under a new project, CLP has started one-to-one counselling on Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) and provides iron and folic acid tablets to pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls.

Influencing Social Norms

The CLP aims to raise the awareness of char people concerning a number of social issues, particularly the status and empowerment of women, reducing the incidences of dowry and early marriage, promoting hygiene practices and educating *char* people on how to access government services.

CLP participants attend weekly social development group meetings throughout the 18-month programme, during which they receive empowerment and awareness training.



Flood Protection

Flooding can destroy the assets of a household. The CLP supports the community to build an earthen plinth for each participant, which extends at least 60cm (about two feet) above the highest known flood level.



This provides a substantial degree of protection from flooding for households and their livestock. The benefits of the plinths go deeper into the community: people that are not direct CLP participants live on them and the wider community can shelter their livestock on them during a flood.

Reducing Vulnerability to Shocks

People on the *chars* face a number of common shocks to their livelihoods, such as ill-health, disability, and the social norm of paying dowry.

By building up an asset base, households are more resilient to these shocks. To reinforce this resilience, the programme facilitates village savings and loans groups, and provides a number of other safety nets, including seasonal employment and cash grants.



Benefits to the Wider Community

Various objectives, such as reducing open defecation, require the participation of the whole community in order to be successful. 'Non-core' participants therefore receive a number of elements of the package, including social development training, access to a latrine and improved water sources, and services from the villages savings and loans project. Some also receive a plinth, if they live very close to 'core' participants. Non-core participants can also access primary healthcare and family planning services from fortnightly satellite clinics without paying for the consultations.

Building Markets

Given that the vast majority of participants choose cattle as their asset, the livestock market and value chain is a critical component of a livelihood. The CLP implements a market development project which aims to alter the ways in which the livestock market works so that people on the *chars* can draw greater benefits from it.



Partnerships

The programme also seeks to ensure that an expanding range of services is provided to the *chars* people, for example in health care and education. It therefore advocates for other institutions and organisations to extend their services to the *chars*. To date, the CLP has worked with the Making Markets Work for the Chars Programme, funded by Swiss Development Cooperation; signed an agreement with BRAC for them to expand their health activities to areas from which CLP has withdrawn; developed a work plan with the Community Legal Services Programme to bring legal services to the *chars*; and is currently working with UNICEF to bring their WASH expertise to the *chars*.

