



Reviewing the CLP's Approach to Measuring Women's Empowerment

Background

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) works with extreme poor households living on island *chars* in North West Bangladesh. The CLP's package of interventions includes components directly targeted at improving women's empowerment. Social development groups, couples orientations and the choice of women as the recipients of the asset transfer project are components of the CLP designed to impact upon the empowerment of women.

Empowerment is a process which is inherently difficult to measure. However, there are good reasons to measure women's empowerment. As the CLP is seeking to improve women's empowerment through components of the programme, there is a clear need to understand their impact. The Innovation, Monitoring and Learning Division (IML), which is responsible for monitoring the outcomes of the CLP, developed a methodology to measure women's empowerment in 2010, at the beginning of the CLP's second phase.

This methodology was centered on a survey which provided information regarding approximately fifty separate indicators across many different dimensions of women's empowerment, as defined by CLP staff in consultation with other stakeholders. These ranged from the personal (levels of female self-confidence), to a woman's position in the household (women's income-earning and decision making power), to a woman's position in society (women's social status). This methodology was shared with extreme poor programmes in Bangladesh and other stakeholders. The survey was used to collect baseline data on first two cohorts of the second phase of the CLP, analysis of which is available on the CLP website.

The advantage of this approach was the breadth of information collected. However, though these indicators provided rich data, they could not be aggregated. The approach did not allow the CLP to understand whether a woman was empowered or not empowered, nor to understand the extent to which she was empowered. The indicators also did not measure women's empowerment according to the communities' perceptions of empowerment. Instead, they measured empowerment according to external judgments of what represents empowerment on the *chars*. The CLP therefore reviewed its approach to monitoring women's empowerment between March and June 2012, in order to address these concerns, and to incorporate the voice of its participants into the monitoring system.



Anowara, a former CLP participant who was elected to local government

The Review Process

The review process began with a literature review. From this, a conceptual framework through which women's empowerment may be understood was developed, based on a document produced by the DFID Social Development Advisor at the beginning of the second phase of the CLP.¹ The document uses the World Bank's definition of empowerment - *a process of enhancing disadvantaged individual's or group's capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes*² - as the centre of its conceptual framework. The literature also suggests that empowerment is highly contextual.³ The use of participatory fieldwork to define indicators of women's empowerment responds to this insight.

IML then considered the outputs required by various stakeholders from its monitoring of women's empowerment. Donors request information regarding the actual number of women empowered by the CLP's activities. There is also a need for the CLP to understand the pathways by which it impacts upon women's empowerment: for example, how does the asset transfer project empower women? Based on these considerations, and the conceptual framework, IML reviewed the present approach and proposed some significant modifications.

Developing a Women's Empowerment Scorecard

The IML Division produced a women's empowerment scorecard, using a participatory research process. The

¹ DFID-Bangladesh, *Capturing and Measuring Empowerment: A How To Note*.

² Alsop, R., Bertelsen, M. and Holland, J. (2006) *Empowerment in Practice: From Analysis to Implementation*, World Bank.

³ For example, see BOND (2012) *Assessing Effectiveness in Empowerment Programmes*.



scorecard is a highly context specific tool, which uses the communities' perceptions to select indicators of women's empowerment which are closely tied to the local social and cultural context.

A series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted on the chars. 25 FGDs were conducted across a number of strata: men, women, members of a control group who have not yet begun to receive the CLP package, participants who have completed the CLP and no longer receive support (CLP-1), male-headed households, female-headed households, and frontline staff from the CLP's implementing organisations. Eventually the data from FGDs conducted with frontline staff was disregarded, as it diverged substantially from the perceptions of CLP participants themselves. In these discussions, men and women were asked to discuss their perceptions of women's empowerment. With questions framed in the context of the local community, FGD participants were asked how an empowered woman can be identified.

This process generated a list of around twenty indicators by which an empowered woman may be identified, per group. These lists provided an overview of the characteristics which comprise women's empowerment in the chars context. In order to select the most important of these indicators for inclusion in the monitoring system, it was necessary to reduce this long-list. The community was therefore asked to discuss which of these empowerment indicators were the most important in showing that a woman is empowered. The groups then selected the ten indicators which they felt were most suitable.

The IML Division's understanding of the relative importance of these ten indicators was then improved through a pair-wise ranking exercise. Pair-wise ranking is a method by which a focus group can be made to systematically compare each indicator with other

indicators. The advantage of pair-wise ranking as opposed to a free discussion is that it is thorough. The focus groups were asked to discuss each pair of indicators in turn, and decide which of the two best demonstrates that a woman is empowered.

The data from this series of exercises were then synthesised into a final list of ten indicators to be used on the scorecard, using the frequency with which an indicator was identified as important during the ranking exercise in order to select the most appropriate. The decision to not use a larger number of indicators was made for two reasons. First, a larger number of indicators increases the complexity of what is being measured; it becomes more difficult to understand exactly what is meant when the CLP's monitoring system says that a woman is empowered. Second, the eleventh and twelfth indicators resulting from the FGDs were both related to children – family planning and decisions regarding children's education – which are not applicable to women without children, and would thus preclude the tool from measuring the empowerment of all CLP participants.

As the research progressed, it became clear that some indicators emerging from the FGDs would not be applicable to Female-Headed Households. For example, *keeping the family's cash* does not accurately measure empowerment in a female-headed household, as the woman is likely to hold the cash by default. The ability to keep cash is not an accurate indicator of a woman's empowerment in this context. A second, parallel process of identifying indicators was therefore conducted. FGDs comprising only women from female-headed households were performed using the same methodology, in order to discover which household level indicators would be appropriate in this context. This resulted in two versions of the women's empowerment score card: one applicable to women in male-headed households, and one applicable to women in female-headed households.

Modifications Resulting from the Review

The Scorecard

The ten indicators defined by the community using this process comprise an empowerment scorecard. The indicators on the scorecard are:

- Making decisions in the household jointly with male household members*
- Having an independent income*
- Keeping the family's cash*
- Influencing decisions regarding investments*
- Having her own savings*
- Membership of a committee*
- The ability to resolve conflict in the community*
- Attending meetings*
- Being asked for advice by other community members*
- Being invited to social occasions*

A completed pair-wise ranking exercise from the FGDs



FGDs revealed that three of these indicators are not relevant to female-headed households. Making decisions in the household jointly with male household members, keeping the family's cash and influencing decisions regarding investments have therefore been removed from the scorecard for women's empowerment in female-headed households, and are have been replaced by making decisions alone (independently of her family or others in the community), ownership of an asset, and being treated well by her family.

Using the Scorecard

The indicators are binary. If a woman achieves an indicator, she receives the requisite points, and conversely she receives no points if she does not achieve the indicator. There is no intermediary stage of achievement. A woman's empowerment score is determined by the characteristics of empowerment which she possesses. A cut off point is drawn which defines which women are empowered and which are not empowered.⁴

Women's empowerment has many dimensions, and it is possible for a woman to be empowered in some areas but not others. The empowerment scorecard can also be used to perform an extra level of analysis through disaggregating empowerment into different domains. The indicators emerging from the FGDs can most cleanly be divided into the categories of *household* and *community*. A separation of this sort allows the CLP to identify the extent to which women are empowered in each domain, providing an additional layer of information and understanding.

The women's empowerment score card allows the CLP to understand its impact on women's empowerment in a number of ways. First, it allows the CLP to monitor the change in the empowerment of its participants through time. Second, it allows the CLP to measure the number of women which it is empowering through its package of interventions. Third, the CLP can understand the domains in which women have each of these levels of empowerment. This approach provides the CLP with detailed information concerning women's empowerment for extreme poor on the *chars*, based upon the communities' understanding of women's empowerment.

Qualitative Research

IML will complement the women's empowerment score card with regular qualitative studies. These studies will take the form of unstructured interviews with CLP

participants. They will allow the CLP to understand the indicators of women's empowerment identified on the score card and the ways in which the CLP impacts upon them. The quantitative data produced by the score card can then be interpreted in the light of a broader understanding of the dynamics of women's empowerment in the *chars* context.

This will provide a substantially greater depth of understanding of both the selected indicators and the dynamics of empowerment on the *chars*. It will allow the CLP to build on the information provided by the quantitative research by asking questions regarding causality: why levels of empowerment vary between different groups, the pathways through which different components of the CLP empower women, and the linkages between empowerment in different domains.

The Way Forward

The CLP has modified its monitoring systems as a result of this review. In July 2012, a panel survey was conducted to collect data on the indicators of women's empowerment which comprise the empowerment scorecard. The survey sample included the most recent cohort of CLP participants (CLP 2.3), former participants from CLP-1 and *char* dwellers from the control group for the 2.3 cohort. This allows IML to compare participants at different stages of the programme – pre-entry, currently in the programme, and post-programme – and their respective empowerment scores. It also allows IML to see the effect of the CLP upon different dimensions of women's empowerment.

This survey will then be repeated systematically at appropriate intervals, including 'baseline' surveys conducted when a new cohort of participants enter the programme. The CLP's monitoring system will thus have the capacity to measure the effects of the CLP upon women's empowerment over time. Qualitative work addressing the causal questions described above will be conducted following analysis of the initial quantitative survey, and then extended in response to questions raised by findings from subsequent surveys.

⁴ Cut-off points are used in many similar approaches. For example, another extreme poor project in Bangladesh, Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction, uses cut-off points for its graduation criteria.