

Joining the Fight Against Extreme Poverty

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) works with extreme poor households living on island *chars* in North Western Bangladesh. The CLP aims to improve the livelihoods, income and food security of up to one million extremely poor women, children and men living on these remote and isolated islands.

The CLP provides an integrated package of support with the aim of targeting the greatest challenges faced by *char* dwellers. These challenges have been identified in the 'Manifesto for the Extreme Poor', an advocacy document developed by SHIREE¹, to raise awareness about extreme poverty in Bangladesh. These challenges include:

- Insufficient economic opportunities
- Exclusion from public services
- Gender and minority specific vulnerabilities
- Health and nutrition vulnerabilities
- Vulnerability to external shocks.

This brief outlines the range of interventions implemented by the CLP to lift *char* dwellers out of extreme poverty.

Insufficient economic opportunities

Char dwellers live in remote and isolated areas. Employment opportunities on the *chars* are heavily reliant on agricultural wage labour, are seasonal and poorly paid. Men often need to leave their families and migrate in order to find work on the mainland. The CLP implements a number of interventions with the aim of improving livelihoods and diversifying economic opportunities on the *chars*.

The cornerstone of the CLP is the Asset Transfer Project. Through the provision of a grant used to purchase an income generating asset, generally livestock, the CLP radically changes the livelihoods of *char* dwellers. The grant allows households to accumulate assets and develop more sustainable livelihoods. To accompany these changes, the CLP is rolling out an ambitious market development project to enhance economic opportunities for *char* households.

The CLP also offers a series of social protection activities to smooth the transition out of extreme



Parul and her husband looking after their cattle

poverty. The CLP creates employment during the winter season, when employment opportunities are relatively scarce. This employment project is a 'Cash for Work' project that uses local labour to raise homesteads above the highest known flood level.

In addition to diversifying livelihoods, the CLP builds the capacity of a number of community members. Depending on individual interest the CLP trains *char* dwellers who want to become village health workers or livestock service providers.

Exclusion from public services

The remoteness of the *chars* has prevented the government from reaching out to the most isolated to provide access to basic public services. The CLP is dedicated to bridging these gaps and aims to bring essential services such as health care and education to the *chars*.



Umma Hani, a village health worker

¹Stimulating Household Improvements Resulting in Economic Empowerment (SHIREE), GoB and UKAID funded programme.

The direct provision of basic services is one facet of CLP's engagement to reduce exclusion from public services. To improve access to health, the CLP trains village health workers and operates satellite clinics led by paramedics to provide primary health care and family planning. However, these services are not sustainable beyond the end of the CLP. To ensure long term access, the CLP advocates for others to bring services to the *chars*.

The CLP is lobbying the government and building partnerships with relevant agencies to bring in health and education facilities. The CLP also gives a voice to communities who undertake lobbying at the Upazila level through Village Development Committees. These committees promote social cohesion and advocate for improved service provision.

Through its market development project, the CLP is also engaged in improving access to market services in the *chars*. In tandem with creating markets for *char* dweller's livestock produce, the project will improve the quality of services necessary for livestock-based businesses, such as feed, fodder, veterinary treatment, irrigation and artificial insemination.

Gender and minority specific risks and vulnerabilities

Women living on the *chars* are particularly vulnerable. In many cases, women are left to support their family with little money to survive. By placing women at the centre of all its interventions, the CLP seeks to empower women and reduce their vulnerability.

In order to address the social dimensions of extreme poverty, the CLP implements a comprehensive social development project dealing with key issues on the *chars*. This social development training engages women on issues such as civil rights, family planning and domestic violence, as well as dowry and early marriage. The CLP also runs couples' orientation sessions which aim to discuss sensitive issues, empower women and encourage joint decision making within the household.

To further improve women's livelihoods, the CLP facilitates the formation of Village Savings and Loans Groups for women on the *chars*. This provides women with an opportunity to manage their money and increase their economic independence. Social safety nets are also put in place whereby women give money or food to more vulnerable community members.

Health and nutrition vulnerabilities

Char dwellers are affected by a wide range of diseases. Common diseases include diarrhoea and skin conditions, as well as hepatitis and worm infections. A large proportion of *char* dwellers also suffer from chronic conditions or disabilities.

The CLP recognises the importance of addressing health in its programme and aims to improve the livelihoods of families burdened by disability. To ensure that graduation from extreme poverty is sustainable, the CLP ensures the provision of basic health care and family planning services on the *chars*.

During Social Development trainings, *char* dwellers also learn about health-related issues and how to reduce the spread of disease within the household. Sessions are conducted on the importance of clean water and sanitation as well as hand washing demonstrations. The CLP also provides access to clean water and sanitary latrines. Water and sanitation is considered a cornerstone of the programme as it has an overarching impact on health, nutrition and food security.

To address nutritional deficiencies faced by *char* dwellers, the CLP will soon roll out a 'Direct Nutrition Intervention'. This project will include the provision of pre and post natal care and will aim to improve the nutritional status of children, adolescent girls and pregnant women through the distribution of micronutrients and deworming tablets.

Vulnerability to external shocks

Island *chars* are prone to flooding and erosion. During the annual monsoon, floodwater sometimes forces unprotected *char* dwellers to migrate to nearby embankments or live on the roof of their submerged houses. Households often lose their assets, thus making them even more vulnerable.

One of the CLP's main objectives is to reduce environmental and economic vulnerability through the provision of essential infrastructure. The CLP raises households on plinths above the highest known flood level. This allows households to protect their homes as well as their assets all year round, even when the water level rises. These plinths have the added benefit of providing a refuge for nearby households and their livestock.

To better manage external shocks, the CLP also provides emergency grants for a variety of emergencies, such as erosion, fire, cyclones and droughts.



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