

Empowerment



The Primary Sources of lessons in this document are projects within DFID's Rural Livelihoods Programme (RLP). The evidences for these lessons mainly come from evaluations of the projects carried out by the Rural Livelihoods Evaluation Partnership (RLEP). The evidences in this document are included as key findings. The Thematic Lessons Paper (TLP) series documents are available in many formats based on stakeholder demand for product style identified through a communications needs assessment survey. This document is the 'Master' or full version of TLP, which includes more detailed lessons clustered under key issues and their evidences recorded as key findings. The TLP series also has available a two page policy brief or 'Summary Sheet' both in English and Bengali. All the documents produced under TLP series are accessible at www.lcgbangladesh.org/rlep.

Thematic Lessons Papers (TLP) are intended for stakeholders who are involved in policy/programme design and influencing, in order to assist them in making informed decisions in the future

The TLPs draw together experiences of livelihoods programme in a particular thematic context. This paper focuses on the Empowerment theme. The lessons in this document are grouped under the following key issues:

- Project Design
- Social Analysis
- Economic Analysis
- Institutional Structures and Constraints
- Capacity of Implementing Agencies
- Developing Capabilities of Poor Communities
- Monitoring and Evaluation

**8 PROJECTS
WITHIN
DFID'S
RURAL
LIVELIHOODS
PROGRAMME
(RLP)**

1. Fisheries Training and Extension Project- II (FTEP II)
2. Agricultural Services Innovation Reform Project (ASIRP)
3. Research and Extension in Farm Power Issues (REFPI)
4. Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance (PETRRA)
5. Support For University Fisheries Education and Research (SUFER)
6. Fourth Fisheries Project (FFP)
7. CARE Rural Livelihoods Programme (CARE RLP)
8. Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM2)

KEY LESSONS SUMMARY

1. Projects must avoid a blueprint approach in favour of approaches that recognise differences between and within communities. Projects should be designed in a way that enables communities to drive the outcomes and take a lead role in the decision-making process.
2. Mechanisms adopted need to promote independence not dependence on implementing agencies through developing direct links and contacts between community members and between the community and service deliverers. The implementing agency must avoid becoming the means through which these relationships function; this will ensure that when the implementing agency withdraws, relationships can continue.
3. Existing social structures can be disempowering and exclude poor people from active participation in community decision-making processes. Thorough social analysis is critical prior to project implementation in order to understand community power structures, design interventions that enable all community members to play an active role and avoid interventions being dominated by elite groups. In a context like Bangladesh, it is particularly important to ensure mechanisms that take account of the diverse interests of women.
4. Economic barriers that prevent participation of the poorest should be minimised. This involves ensuring that participation in interventions does not result in lost income through a loss of working hours, and that poor people are not excluded due to criteria for participation that includes minimum asset or financial thresholds.
5. Empowerment must be recognised as a longer-term outcome alongside project outputs such as increased production and income generation. Mechanisms to achieve both empowerment and set outputs must be included within the project.
6. Communities need to be empowered to articulate their demands to local government, equally local government must have the capacity to respond. Interventions that work with government in the supply of services can raise expectations at the local level. Once expectations are raised communities need to be empowered to engage with government around service delivery. Global experience indicates that this also involves working with government extension services to improve the ability of duty holders to respond.
7. Partnerships with implementing agencies need to include a common commitment to empowerment and the use of empowering processes. Without this shared commitment an organisation is unlikely to have the organisational structures, willingness or ability to facilitate projects that contribute to empowerment.
8. Field staff responsible for facilitating project processes at the community level must be supported throughout the project cycle. Facilitating empowering processes is a difficult task that requires very particular skill sets. On-going training and support is vital.
9. Poor communities need knowledge, skills and confidence to engage with project processes and require support so that their views are not overlooked. Building a sense of collective and individual agency is crucial.
10. Mainstreaming empowerment into logical frameworks and monitoring and evaluation systems provides an important incentive for project partners to prioritise empowerment processes. This means including qualitative indicators of change in addition to the quantitative indicators that capture outputs against preset targets.
11. Collecting disaggregated information by gender, age, caste or other specific social groupings is vital in order to understand programme inclusion and exclusion and therefore who may or may not be benefiting from programme interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment has been defined in a variety of ways at various times. However, understandings share a rights-based approach as the starting point for processes that enable people to take control of their lives and assets through the ability to make informed and free choices. DFID has articulated this as:

'Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and to fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society' (DFID, 2000)

Recent studies have demonstrated that the context in which people live in rural Bangladesh is constantly changing. Rather than the typical images of rural and urban divisions in livelihood strategies, analysis identifies a rural-urban continuum, in which livelihood diversification, migration and changing gender relations characterise the rural context.

With this changing context, statistics indicate that whilst growth is being experienced in Bangladesh, livelihood improvements for the rural poor have lagged behind those of the urban poor. Approximately 80% of poor people live in rural Bangladesh, where economic inequality between social groups is higher than in urban areas. The recent DFID study, 'Hands Not Land' found that the rising inequalities in rural Bangladesh are indicative of the lack of ability of poor communities and poor individuals within communities to take advantage of new opportunities. Enabling poor people to remove the barriers that prevent them benefiting from new and changing opportunities is crucial for poverty reduction and a central motivation for empowerment strategies.

In addition, the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for Bangladesh (2003) identifies active participation of all as crucial in promoting good governance and ensuring that accountability exists within the delivery of public services. Therefore empowering communities to voice their demands and rights must be a national priority.

THEMATIC LESSONS

Key Issue 1 Project Design

Projects often overlook the potential impact and opportunities to promote empowerment. Empowerment objectives are often not supported or recognised in the project design and therefore not maximised.

Key lesson for 'better practice'

Promoting Community Ownership and Sustainability

Empowerment must be recognised as an explicit outcome within project design if it is to be achieved successfully. Projects should avoid blueprints and recognise local diversity as well as create linkages between all parties in order to promote longer-term sustainability.

Lessons Learnt

Enabling flexibility/avoiding blueprints. Blueprint programmes should be avoided in favour of more flexible models of working that incorporate an understanding of cultural diversity and allow for local difference. This also enables communities to make choices and not to be constrained within a rigid project framework.

Commitments to empowerment must be reflected within logical frameworks. For many of these rural livelihood projects empowerment was not an intended outcome during the design phases and is not reflected in the logical frameworks. Without a commitment to empowerment from the outset, efforts are often an 'add-on' and not central to the programme.

Promoting sustainability. Mechanisms adopted need to promote independence not dependence on implementing agencies through developing direct links and contacts between community members and between the community and service deliverers. The implementing agency must avoid becoming the means through which these relationships function, this will ensure that when the implementing agency withdraws, relationships can continue.

Enabling the voices of community members to be heard. Project design should concentration enabling communities to participate in local decision-making processes. Interventions focusing only on the supply-side, through work with national and local government, are likely to be less sustainable than those that also work with communities to enable them to articulate their demands for appropriate services and realisation of their rights. Enabling communities to articulate their demands will help to ensure accountability of service providers beyond the life of the project.

Strengthening local social capital. The links, trust and bonds within and between social groups, is an important aspect of empowerment. Improved social capital is vital to ensure that communities are not dependent on implementing organisations and facilitators. This means adopting approaches that build linkages between poor people as well as between poor communities and service providers or local government, so that the ability of local communities to demand services continues after the programme has been completed.

Key Findings

- A review of Care's Nijera Pilot Project noted that the pilot uses sanitation as an entry point for community empowerment. Whilst the project is in its early stages of implementation the review team questioned this approach, which restricts the choices that communities can make through a predetermined starting-point. This is in apparent contradiction to learning from Care Rural Livelihoods Programme (RLP), which has demonstrated that interventions must be led by participants' identification of needs from the outset if they are to work towards empowerment.
- Agricultural Services Innovation and Reform Project (ASIRP) has focused on improvements to service delivery to rural people through work with government. Evaluations have demonstrated limited success of donor efforts to improve the supply of services and reviews indicate that supply-side interventions alone are insufficient to bring about lasting change. Findings from ASIRP indicate that work with government on the supply of services should be accompanied by support to communities to enable their voice to be heard in the demand of quality services.
- Fisheries Training and Extension Project Phase Two (FTEP2) review findings indicate that in addition to working with local government, a focus is needed on demand creation amongst the community, through community awareness and mobilisation. Without emphasis on the demand-side processes, poorer people in particular will not be able to make their voices heard to demand access to the quality services that they need. This is of particular concern as the project comes to an end. The End of Project Review indicated significant livelihood production increases and subsequent raised expectations, but noted that strategies must be adopted to enable the poor to demand services from local government after the project has been phased out.

Key Issue 2 Social Analysis

Understanding the social context in which individual projects operate is vital. Relationships, power structures, economic circumstance and cultural contexts vary across communities. Strategies that contribute to empowerment of poor people in one context may not be appropriate for another. Thorough social analysis can inform design and adaptation of strategies to ensure that they are appropriate for each community context.

Key lesson for 'better practice'

Understanding power relations and diversity

Social analysis is vital to develop an understanding of the community in which a project is being implemented. Different interest groups and power groups must be identified, as well as those who are marginalised within the community. Without this analysis, interventions, including participatory interventions, could unwittingly promote inequality and further entrench inequalities.

Lessons Learnt

Creating space for participation. Poorer and more marginalised groups are often less able to make their voices heard if they are in communities in which their interests are not valued. This can exclude them from project interventions and decision-making processes, which in turn may perpetuate their marginalisation and poverty. Working with homogenous groups e.g. women, fisher folk etc. provides space for more marginalised community members to participate more actively and express their views.

Elite capture. The dominance of elites in decision-making forums can exclude the views of the poorest, marginal groups or those with other interests within the community. Whilst elite capture should be avoided through strategies that create space for active participation of target groups, the elite should also be included. The elite, or power holders within a community can participate in programmes in a positive way, facilitating the development of local linkages and providing access to key local actors.

Key Findings

- Early evidence from Care's Nijera Pilot Project indicates that empowerment of poor people is easier to realise where communities have less class differentiation. The review team noted that this was largely because efforts did not have to go into removing disempowering structures that currently governed community interactions.
- Findings from Care's Farmer Field Schools (FFS) indicate that the poorest and women are most able and willing to participate when there is a focus on their needs and interests. This is most likely to occur where community groups are formulated around particular interests or social groupings. In addition to enabling participation of the marginalised, it was found that these community groups are most likely to be sustainable over the longer-term.
- Nijera Kori and Samata both recognise power dynamics and diversity as a central component of their projects. In order to overcome initial constraints to empowerment Nijera Kori and Samata work separately with men and women through single-sex community groups. The community groups are brought together once participants have developed confidence. Evidence of change includes women acquiring rights over land and an increase in status within the household and the community as a result of their participation in critical community issues.
- Evidence from Community Based Fisheries Management Project two (CBFM2) demonstrates the need to recognise difference and social barriers to active participation. In this case, women were invited to join the management committees during the implementation phase, in an attempt to address gender within the project. Whilst women sat on the committees they typically lacked voice in discussions and social structures made their active participation almost impossible in many cases.
- Findings from Care RLP have indicated that where a community has powerful elites, group formulation has been more difficult. Indeed, where there are elites present in a group and those elites have in turn dominated the group, there is less potential for developing activities that may challenge the political structure or social structures that create barriers to poverty alleviation.
- CBFM2 has demonstrated that local power relations can be used positively through, for example, the routine inclusion of local government officers within project processes. If managed well, this can increase and can contribute towards greater community links to government and service providers.

Key Issue 3 Economic Analysis

Economic analysis is important in understanding social behaviour. Low levels of economic security can prevent people's participation either because they cannot afford the time away from work or because their income falls below economic thresholds set by the project as criteria for inclusion. Additionally, economic considerations are critical to people's ability to take up opportunities presented by programmes. Early findings suggest that minimum levels of security in resources, assets and income are needed to enable inclusion in projects.

Key lesson for 'better practice'**Economic Constraints**

Projects should consider economic constraints alongside social constraints during project design and ensure that requirements of participation are sympathetic to the economic situation of the poorer members of the target group and do not prevent people from participating.

Lessons Learnt

Economic empowerment. Consideration of economic situation and requirements of poorer community members should aim to minimise the costs of participation, that typically constrain poor people's involvement in projects. This can be achieved by ensuring that meetings are arranged at a time and place convenient to the community and their daily routine.

Resource thresholds. Where projects require participants to have access to or own a minimum level of resources and asset, poor people are often excluded from participation and should be removed if the programme is trying to reach these groups.

Economic security. Low levels of economic security can prevent individuals from being able to benefit from opportunities or put into practice new skills gained. A minimum level of resources and assets may be required for opportunities to be taken-up.

Key Findings

- The study 'Hands Not Land' (2004, IDL Group/DFID) identifies the need for social, knowledge and asset barriers to be removed in order for poor households to take advantage of new opportunities. The study found that those with access to resources have been able to take advantage of new opportunities presented through diversification of livelihoods, whilst the poor, without these resources have not. Access to resources was compounded by a lack of knowledge and information about the 'outside world' and how to interact with markets.
- A Fourth Fisheries Project (FFP) review team noted that poor people were often excluded from participation in the open-water fisheries management due to high resource requirements needed for participation.
- The implementation review mission for FFP included two different models operating within the Alternative Livelihood Pilot Programme. The programme is being implemented through ActionAid and BRAC. ActionAid's approach places emphasis on economic empowerment, whereby groups are offered a grant to enable debts to be paid and equipment to be purchased, before the introduction of training. BRAC's approach works through the household level, rather than providing grants. BRAC uses an investment programme along with training in employment and enterprise development. Both components of the pilot programme are in their infancy, however anecdotal evidence exists of resistance and jealousy within communities to the grant-based approach, perhaps indicating the need for social empowerment alongside economic and community ownership of grant schemes. Future reviews should be documented to capture learning from these two approaches.

Key Issue 4 **Institutional Structures and Constraints**

Rural livelihoods projects have typically functioned within clear implementation frameworks that place emphasis on meeting tangible targets against a set of defined outputs, such as increased production or income generation. The reporting structures and timeframes set out for delivery of outputs are often not intended to capture social change such as empowerment and are therefore unlikely to support it.

Key lesson for 'better practice'**Flexibility within Institutional Structures**

Empowerment of poor communities will only be achieved by broadening out from target-driven systems that require delivery of specific project outputs in a relatively short timeframe. More flexible reporting systems and timeframes are needed that allow projects to focus on outcomes and processes needed to deliver change rather than simply project outputs.

Lessons Learnt

Time-scales. Typically project timeframes are too short to achieving lasting social change. Rural livelihoods projects have not been designed with this in mind but rather the delivery of more tangible outputs, such as increased production levels. Projects driven by targets alone are not compatible with empowerment objectives.

Reporting mechanisms/managing upwards. Implementing agencies and field workers may be constrained by reporting systems and lack of decision-making autonomy. Field workers themselves need to be empowered to work in ways that facilitate the community to make their own choices, rather than having to deliver only preset outputs, in a preset way.

Key Findings

- Whilst Care RLP is aware of the need for empowering processes that create qualitative change, project structures do not always reflect this. Reviews noted that reporting of change and measurement of success focused on quantitative outputs such as measurement of activities and quantifiable income generation levels. A review team found that this often resulted in success of community groups being identified in those able to secure high-income generation levels. This in-turn tended to be community groups whose participants had greater financial assets and linkages to power holders. The reporting structures and the time periods in which change had to be demonstrated meant that field staff had few formal incentives to work with poorer community members or adopt an outcome led process-based approach.

Key Issue 5 Capacity of Implementing Agencies

Empowerment can only be brought about (within the project context) through project processes that allow poor people to make their voices heard, take an active role in decision making, and participate fully in project interventions. This demands specific skills and places high expectations and heavy workloads on staff facilitating processes at the field level responsible for empowerment processes.

Key lesson for 'better practice'

Capacity of the Implementing Agencies

Some implementing partners are constrained by their limited skills and capacity to facilitate empowerment. The particular skill sets required to facilitate empowerment cannot be assumed or undervalued and personnel need to be selected with this in mind and provided with the appropriate training and support during implementation. Partner organisations should share a commitment to empowerment rather than just service delivery or extension work.

Lessons Learnt

Partnerships. Partnerships with implementing agencies need to include a common commitment to empowerment and the use of empowering processes. Without this shared commitment an organisation is unlikely to have the organisational structures, willingness or ability to facilitate projects that contribute to empowerment.

Personnel capacity. Initial training and on-going support is required for implementing agency staff facilitating processes at the field level. This includes not only training in key skills, but also an understanding of rights-based approaches and the way in which these fit within the livelihoods framework.

Key Findings

- The Output to Purpose team for Care RLP found that some implementing partner NGOs had a limited understanding of empowerment and the processes needed to promote empowerment. Instead partner NGOs tended to think more in terms that could promote dependency.
- An early review of Care's Nijera pilot project indicates that with appropriate training and support, field level staff can develop their capacity to move away from training to a facilitation role that places emphasis on the community to conduct their own analysis and develop their own implementation strategies for change. This is supported through the semi-autonomous nature of Nijera in which the facilitators are more able to be flexible, responding to community decisions.

Key Issue 6 Developing Capabilities of Poor Communities

Whilst individuals all share a basic capacity to participate in processes not all are able to exercise that capacity. Poorer members of the community may be excluded from participating in projects through a lack of knowledge and skills crucial for them to voice opinions and act upon the opportunities presented.

Key lesson for 'better practice'

Knowledge and Skill Constraints

Projects must be designed to ensure that not only social and economic constraints to participation are addressed, but also capability constraints to participation of poorer people.

Lessons Learnt

Exclusion. During project implementation phases, sections of communities can be excluded from participation due to perceptions of other stakeholders that they lack the ability to make meaningful contributions, either due to lack of knowledge or skills.

Capacity building. Poorer members of communities may not be able to take up opportunities presented to them because of their lack of knowledge, skills or confidence. Capacity building is therefore a crucial component of projects.

Active participation. Although community members may be included in interventions they may not be able to fully participate due to a lack of skills. The temptation may be for the facilitator to carry out analysis for the group; resulting in activities that are based on the facilitator's inputs, not those of the participants. Time should be allowed for skills development, enabling participants to carry out their own analysis in order to decide upon their own strategies for overcoming problems or implementing activities.

Key Findings

- A review team for the FFP identified that many of the traditional and practising fishers were not selected as lead participants within the Fisheries Management Committee. The team noted that these poorer groups were often dominated by elites groups within the community and commented that capacity needs to be developed of traditional and practising fishers to enable them to take a lead role in decision-making.
- A review of Care RLP found that knowledge transfer does not necessarily enable groups to put this knowledge into practice. Knowledge transfer must be accompanied by learning that allows people to use the knowledge gained. The review noted that training focused on knowledge and skill transfer, but comments that Farmer Field Schools provide the opportunity for learning that is reflective because it takes place within the community, enabling trainers to help participants to adapt knowledge to their own contexts.
- Care RLP Output to Purpose Review noted that Farmer Field School groups tended to function an extension service, rather than through a learning approach. They noted that marketing initiatives were often undertaken before the groups had carried out their own analysis of livelihood resources and opportunities. Marketing strategies were therefore based on analysis of project staff rather than participants.

Key Issue 7 Monitoring and Evaluation

Projects that do not mainstream empowerment throughout their operating frameworks will not create an environment in which staff prioritise empowerment as an objective. This is particularly important within the monitoring and evaluation framework against which project success is measured and therefore against which project staff are likely to measure their individual professional success. If the monitoring and evaluation framework does not include qualitative measures of empowerment, the project is unlikely to place emphasis on empowerment, or achieve it.

Key lesson for 'better practice'

Social Indicators of Impact

Incentives for empowerment are often lacking within programme structures, particularly within the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, where success is measured through outputs, such as predetermined behaviour change, production or income changes. Greater focus needs to be given to mainstreaming social indicators, in order to promote incentives for fieldworkers to prioritise empowerment processes.

Lessons Learnt

Qualitative and quantitative indicators. Indicators should include both quantitative and qualitative indicators in order to measure and understand participation, empowerment and social change. Counting the numbers of attendees at a meeting does not provide information on the impact or outcomes of programme interventions.

Disaggregated data. Collecting disaggregated information by gender, age, caste or other specific social groupings is vital in order to understand programme inclusion and exclusion and therefore who may or may not be benefiting from programme interventions.

Monitoring and evaluation. M & E of projects and programmes are often extractive and do not contribute to empowerment. A participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation could itself contribute to the empowerment of poor households and communities.

Key Findings

- Awareness of the need for participation of women in CBFM2 resulted in women being invited to sit on the committees, but allowed them no entry-point through which to participate in discussions or decision-making. In monitoring participation, the quantitative measures used failed to highlight how women benefited from attendance or change power relations that resulted. Counting the number of women attending must be balanced with qualitative measures of participation. Without these qualitative indicators, pressures to met quantitative targets could reinforce existing power imbalances, or mask what is changing or not.
- The Output to Purpose Review team for Care RLP expressed a concern that monitoring and evaluation methodology served to extract information from the community and did not contribute to empowerment of the groups providing the information.

WAY FORWARD?

- Many components contribute to empowerment processes, and will not all be present in one programme. Impact on community-based power structures, policy environments, service provision, increased rights awareness and an increased ability to articulate and demand services and rights are long-term goals that require significant social and political change. Recognising areas of expertise and creating networks among development partners that enable each to build on their strengths may be an efficient way of working together to contribute to empowerment (Chitepa et al. 2005).
- Project design should move away from blueprint approaches, to approaches that integrate thorough social, political and economic analysis of each specific project context.
- More holistic, longer-term approaches to rural livelihood interventions would enable programme-based approaches that are less confined by output-focused targets and more conducive to empowerment.
- Social and political analysis should be conducted during the design to enable proper consideration of empowerment issues. Understanding existing power structures is crucial to addressing empowerment coherently.
- A balance should be struck between support to government's capacity to deliver quality services and support to communities to articulate demands for quality services and realisation of their rights. Dual approaches that empower local communities to make their voices heard will promote sustainability of interventions.
- The development of local social capital should be a priority from the outset of a project. This takes time but plays a critical role in empowering communities to take control of their lives and assets beyond the life of a project.
- Implementing NGOs should share a commitment to empowerment and support their partner NGOs at the field level to ensure that they understand empowerment objectives. Support may include working with partner NGOs to develop operating structures that prioritise long-term social change alongside the more immediate output driven targets.
- Prior to and during project implementation field staff should receive continued support and training to develop their facilitation skills, which are crucial to promotion of empowerment.
- Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should include social indicators of change that are able to capture progress in empowerment. Frameworks should acknowledge that empowerment takes time and ensure incentives exist for its promotion.

FURTHER READING

Bartlett, A. (2004): Entry Points for Empowerment. CARE Bangladesh. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Bennet, L. (2002): Using Empowerment and Social Inclusion for Pro-Poor Growth: A Theory of Social Change. Background Paper for the Social Development Sector Strategy Paper, World Bank.

Chitepa, S., Meyer, J., and Jay, A. (2005): Rural Livelihoods Programme Capturing Lessons Learned. Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, National Centre.

DFID (2000): 'Poverty elimination and the empowerment of women'.

RLEP (2003-2004): End of Project Reports of FTEP II, ASIRP; Output to Purpose Reports of CBFM2, CARE RLP; Rapporteurs Report of key findings forum for cluster 1, 2 and 3; and Aide Memoire of FFP. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Sen, A. (1999): Development and Freedom, New York: Knopf, Random House.

Toufique, K. and Turton, C. (2003): Hands Not Land: How Livelihoods are changing in Rural Bangladesh. The IDL group, March 2003. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

More information on these themes and issues can be found in project Output to Purpose and End of Project Review documents accessible at www.lcgbangladesh.org/rlep.