AN OVERVIEW OF THE BRIEFS

CLP was co-financed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). It was managed by Maxwell Stamp PLC and sponsored by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (MLGRD&C) and executed by the Rural Development and Cooperatives Division (RDCD) of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

CLP operated in two phases – CLP1, from 2004 to 2010, and CLP2, from April 2010 to March 2016. Over that time, CLP accumulated substantial experience from working with the extreme-poor in remote areas.

CLP is widely recognised as having been a very successful programme. CLP2 directly (and in many cases dramatically) transformed the lives of over 78,000 core participant households, and improved the livelihoods of one million poor and vulnerable people. Moreover, it achieved this while operating in one of the most challenging environments in the world: the riverine island chars in the Jamuna (Brahmaputra), Teesta, and Padma rivers of north-western Bangladesh.

During the course of its implementation, CLP needed to undergo a number of major changes, to respond to a range of new challenges, and to test out a variety of approaches. It involved itself in many different activities, spanning everything from livelihood improvement to market development, from social protection to land reform, from education to nutrition, and from health to veterinary services.

BACKGROUND

Escaping the cycle of poverty is especially difficult in the char context of Bangladesh. Households not only need to withstand environmental challenges, they also have to carve out a livelihood in a place where access to markets is difficult. The poorest households are susceptible to the effects of the annual floods, which can destroy their homes and deprive them of nearly all their possessions. In addition, their usual source of income – agricultural day labour – has seasonal fluctuations in demand, so there are regular times when there is not enough work.

Besides lacking adequate food, housing and land, the geographical isolation also means that char-dwellers often do not get access to basic social safety nets or health and education services. Women on the chars face an additional set of challenges because social norms are patriarchal, opportunities for education are limited and they have little control over family finances or decision-making.

CLP's programme focused on improving livelihoods; food security; water, sanitation and hygiene practices; nutrition; and building women's empowerment and resilience. CLP's support was largely provided to adult females in the form of an integrated package. At the end of the 18 months of assistance, CLP aimed for participants to have "graduated" or moved out of extreme poverty.

A cornerstone of CLP programme was the provision of an asset that could generate an income. Households were able to use the initial asset to gradually accumulate further income-generating assets, typically livestock and land. These provided diversified incomes for participants and decreased their reliance on wage labour. In addition, by helping to move homesteads above the flood level by building raised plinths, CLP was able to help provide residents with greater resilience to environmental shocks.

The Programme's goals sought to address a number of vulnerabilities across different dimensions: physical, economic, It was inevitable that certain challenges would arise. The set of Lessons Learnt Briefs developed by CLP cover a vast range of activities and take a hard look internally at many of the Programme's operations. While naturally not an exhaustive investigation of the entire range of CLP activities and impacts, the collection of Briefs focuses on a series of issues related to selecting extreme-poor participants and developing specific programmes to cater to their needs; monitoring and assessing success across certain programmes and priorities; managing internal corporate structures and systems; and evaluating the long-term ramifications of CLP's work.

THE BRIEFS

Over the years it operated, CLP learnt a number of very important lessons. These lessons are now documented in a series of Lessons Learnt briefs which are intended to share CLP's experience with donors and practitioners, both in Bangladesh and further afield.

The following overview offers an introduction to the topics covered by the various briefs.

SELECTING PARTICIPANTS & MEASURING SUCCESS BRIEFS

Selecting the right participants is one of the core challenges for any poverty reduction programme because it determines how efficiently the investment reaches the targeted population. It is important, therefore, to examine the practical aspects of establishing criteria for targeting beneficiaries and selecting participants. At the same time, developing a set of indicators to measure graduation can be an integral part of estimating success, not only for the programme's donors but also its participants.

The credibility and effectiveness of development efforts is challenged when resources fail to reach those most in need,so well-resourced and well-managed monitoring and evaluation systems are essential to monitor progress and outputs.

This subset of Briefs examines how, in some cases, definitions needed to be broadened and adapted to local contexts. The Briefs also explore the challenges that were encountered when disagreements arose about such definitions and how delays were created when over-review became a phenomenon. It is clear from these briefs how important it is to collect reliable information, measure progress and conduct regular internal analysis and audits.

Defining who to target and how to develop selection criteria:

- A set of selection criteria for defining extreme poverty that takes the wider context into consideration resulted in a finer selection of participants and greater acceptance in the communities than narrow, income-based criteria.
- Adopting a broader definition of "char" helped GoB and DFID reconcile their understandings of the targeted working area and allowed CLP to add more households in need to the programme.
- Targeting women served to increase women's empowerment as well as providing an additional income to the household.
- CLP2 broadened inclusion to those not selected as direct participant households. This was done to reduce possible social division arising from supply of high value inputs to a targeted group within a population in which there is an undoubted, pervasive general need for support.
- A range of interventions like sanitation, behavioural change and disease control are best tackled with a community-wide approach.

Developing graduation criteria:

- Be clear on the purpose of your graduation criteria and ensure stakeholders agree.
- Establish your graduation criteria early on and don't over-review.
- Make sure there is a logic to the criteria you select, and their thresholds.
- Think through the data collection, analysis and reporting framework early.
- Changes to the LogFrame might affect your graduation criteria.
- Once agreed, make sure staff are aware of the graduation criteria.
- Don't forget to track sustainability of graduation.

Developing Monitoring & Evaluation systems:

- Consider tracking a range of important indicators rather than over-emphasising household income and expenditure.
- The pipeline control can be a good approach to demonstrating a level of attribution.
- Develop a set of themes for packaging information.
- Involve the community in setting indicators and thresholds (targets).
- Develop a simple activity / output monitoring system and don't overdo it.
- Outsource the quality control of activities / outputs.
- Integrate M&E and Communications functions

DEVELOPING & IMPLEMENTING SPECIFIC PROJECTS

Among the many efforts of CLP, there were specific projects that were implemented during the course of CLP's operations. A small set of these projects are explained and critiqued in the Lessons Learnt Briefs. Included here is an evaluation of the direct nutrition programme, a discussion of the benefits of mobile cash transfers, and the tricky issue of how to measure women's empowerment. In this subset of Briefs, issues of adapting traditional values, dealing with low levels of literacy and the significance of community-wide implementation and involvement come to the fore. A number of innovations were developed in these projects, which are explained in greater detail in the individual Briefs.

Implementing direct nutrition interventions:

- Low literacy and capacity levels can hamper the gathering of accurate data.
- Implementation approaches must be flexible and context-oriented.
- Systemic change is catalysed when a community-wide approach is used.
- Understanding the gender implications of nutrition interventions is important for efficacy.
- Staff requirements should be planned from project outset to ensure efficiency of resources.
- Coupled with awareness training, implementing an effective patient referral process can change the health-seeking behaviour of the extreme-poor.
- A visual-oriented training / counselling curriculum approach can be more effective in increasing awareness among extreme-poor populations.

Using mobile banking services:

- Mobile financial services can be used to include people with no access to formal financial services.
- Mobile transfers can be used despite the absence of national identity cards; core participants also do not need a mobile phone.
- Transfers through mobile phones have positive knock-on effects, such as: providing a secure way to save; an alternative means to transfer remittances; and enhancing women's empowerment.
- Use of mobile transfers has value-for-money benefits.
- Scaling up to reach all participants can be hampered by a shortage of agents in remote areas.

- Problems can arise that cannot be resolved locally, which means delays in participants receiving their money.
- Programme participants need assistance and instruction in opening mobile banking accounts.

Measuring women's empowerment:

- Getting the community involved in defining women's empowerment results in a defendable approach.
- Use mixed methods to collect data.
- Recognise that the definition of women's empowerment is context specific and likely to change over time.
- Account for the possibility that respondents will tell you what they think you want to know.
- Acknowledge the risk that questions can be interpreted in different ways.
- Even some obvious things can be overlooked.

MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS, STRATEGIES AND CULTURE

When it comes to ananalysis of CLP as an organisation, an additional level of organisational impact and effectiveness is examined in the set of Briefs that consider management systems, strategies and culture. These elements inform subtly, but importantly, how the project ends up performing.

Dealing with risk was a primary management issue. It required the innovative implementation of appropriate financial strategies, the monitoring of potential and actual fraud, and the development of a healthy corporate culture. Across all of these areas, the degree to which value-for-money principles were followed also became integral to the success of the Programme. Transparency and evidence-based decision-making are critical.

Designing good risk management strategies:

- Implement systems that are empowered to monitor and audit.
- Internal audits serve as a deterrent.
- Fraud management starts with a zero tolerance approach.
- Verification surveys with third-party providers can be effective
- Institute real-time verification processes for high-cost activities
- Use the element of surprise to optimise verification, supervision and deterrence.
- Staff in outlying areas can play a crucial role in monitoring.
- Regular communication about risk management demonstrates high expectations and commitment
- Recognise demands will be placed on resources.
- Technical risk management and enforcing contracts is essential to keeping all components in sync.

USING VALUE-FOR-MONEY PRINCIPLES:

- A good Value-for-Money Strategy uses the "3Es" conceptual framework based on the three VfM building blocks of Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness.
- In order to calculate the various aspects of VfM, a project needs to have good systems and data.
- It is worth investing in quality systems.
- A marginal incremental gains approach is useful; any and all small improvements can add up.
- Regular monitoring and evaluation contributes to good VfM through identifying challenges as well as "what works".
- Output monitoring and verification processes and surveys are important. These help to hold contractors accountable for quality standards and pick up on challenges and / or fraud or misappropriation.
- Invest time and effort into developing appropriate measurement indicators for success.
- Be realistic, strategic and proportionate when it comes to data gathering efforts. It is not good VFM to collect data that is not analysed; but it is also not good VFM to have an inadequate evidence base for decision-making.

Building a good corporate culture:

- Define what you mean by a successful organisational culture.
- Policies are implemented by people and require political will.
- Clearly set out expectations in formal contracts that are enforceable.
- Good evidence-based decision-making requires having solid monitoring and evaluation (M&E) structures in place, and then using them.
- Use failure as an opportunity to teach and encourage as well as to reiterate core values and principles.
- Sanctions and discipline can serve as tools to reinforce elements of corporate culture, but so can reward and demonstrations of fair process.
- Words and deeds must match.
- Make a commitment to transparency and evidence-based decision-making.
- Listen to the stories people tell about their work.

LOOKING FORWARD

CLP's work was aimed at assisting char-dwellers not only to begin a journey out of poverty but also to maintain it. Identifying and working with a variety of stakeholders to produce linkages and/or provide additional resources to the chars, therefore, became very important. Given limited resources, difficult decisions always needed to be made on how and where to best focus efforts.

These kinds of questions about how best to balance strategies and activities also inform many of the ongoing debates about social protection initiatives. Having spent over ten years engaged in this work, one of the final activities CLP engaged in was a careful self-analysis of its programmes. The last brief in the series, therefore, outlines the ways in which CLP's lessons learnt through the course of its operations can offer insights into social protection debates.

Forging good partnerships:

- Recognise that additional resources from other organisations will be required to sustain outcomes.
- Find ways to improve and incentivise sustainability.
- View partnerships as if you are selling a "product".
- Forging long-term relationships depends in part on regulatory frameworks.
- Plan ahead about how to form partnerships.
- Developing partnerships is more than a technical skill, it requires real relationships to be developed.
- Always be thinking about partnership potential.

Contributing to ongoing social protection debates:

- There is a fine balance between being inclusive or exclusive when targeting beneficiaries
- Tough decisions will need to be made across the key dimensions of depth, breadth and length of a programme
- When working with NGOs, give credit where credit is due
- Recognise the incapacity problem
- The private sector has a role to play in a livelihoods programme

UNIVERSAL LESSONS

Each Brief offers a unique set of specific lessons learnt within its domain. However, across many of these Briefs there are also some universal lessons learnt. First and foremost, it is important to consistently ask the tough questions about challenges, lessons and successes. CLP was a complex, lengthy and always-evolving project and the Programme itself was redesigned along the way, resulting in two phases: a CLP1 and CLP2. A constant theme was finding ways to balance that which was doable with that which was desirable, and many times a compromise was required to get the best of both. There are choices every time – long or short, narrow or wide, high-cost or low-cost – and engaging in regular self-reflection, auditing and improvement can help inform these decisions. Other universal lessons include:

- Low levels of literacy will hamper data gathering and adoption of new technologies.
- Traditional values and beliefs will shape the capacity to adapt to new knowledge.
- Programmes should always consider the local context when attempting to define where to assist and how to measure success.
- It is beneficial to act with transparency and use failure as an opportunity to learn.
- Give credit where credit is due and act decisively when policies are violated.
- Determining whether programme assistance should be targeted at households or at communities can be tricky.
- Encourage the community to help define indicators, criteria, thresholds and goals.
- Being aware of sustainability issues and opportunities should start from the beginning.

Working with the poorest of the poor on the chars in Bangladesh was a challenge and a privilege.

We hope you will find this series of Lessons Learnt Briefs of use. For more information about CLP please visit the CLP website www.clp-bangladesh.org.

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Chars Livelihoods Programme

Reducing Extreme Poverty on the Riverine Islands of North West Bangladesh