



# CLP'S CONTRIBUTION TO ONGOING SOCIAL PROTECTION DEBATES

## SUMMARY

After operating from 2004 – 2016, the Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) has accumulated vast experience working with the extreme-poor and in remote areas. During its final year, CLP developed a series of Lessons Learnt briefs with donors and development practitioners in mind.

Between October 2014 and January 2015 CLP underwent a facilitated self-evaluation, the objective of which was to capture the key lessons learnt from ten years operating on the chars. It was intended to inform DFID-Bangladesh's (DFID-B) and DFAT's programming for its next cycle of funding to help the extreme-poor in Bangladesh. It was also hoped that the self-evaluation would contribute to the global knowledge base.

A core section of the self-evaluation report addresses CLP's contributions to ongoing social protection debates. This brief, which is one in a series of lessons learnt briefs, provides a summary of that particular section. The on going debates summarised here include:

## LESSONS INCLUDE:



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

## BACKGROUND

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) was a poverty reduction programme implemented in Bangladesh and 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.

People on the riverine islands ("chars") of north-west Bangladesh had precarious livelihoods. They were often heavily reliant on low-paid and unpredictable agricultural day labour, and there were few other stable livelihood options open to them. They were vulnerable to environmental shocks that could have devastating effects on their livelihoods, with flooding a particular risk. Most chars-dwellers moved home several times in the last few years due to floods or char erosion. Many reported that they had lost all their possessions and assets at least once in the past.

The precariousness of their livelihoods meant that many chars households faced food insecurity and suffered from the effects of under-nutrition. Limited access to improved water sources and sanitation and low levels of services such as health, education and livelihoods support were further challenges, resulting in chars-dwellers being amongst the poorest people in Bangladesh. CLP aimed to work with these people to help them lift themselves out of poverty.

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. By the end of its tenure, CLP directly (and in many cases dramatically) transformed the lives of over 78,000 core participant households, and it 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, 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.

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A core section of the self-evaluation report addresses CLP's contributions to ongoing debates. This brief provides a summary of that section.

<sup>1</sup>Freeland N et al; *Mirror, Mirror on the chars: an Operational Review of the Chars Livelihoods Programme*; January 2015



## LESSONS LEARNT

### THERE IS A FINE BALANCE BETWEEN BEING INCLUSIVE OR EXCLUSIVE WHEN TARGETING BENEFICIARIES

Selecting beneficiaries on the basis of their relative poverty is always going to be arbitrary; and providing selected beneficiaries with a substantial asset transfer is always going to be inequitable. CLP made a defensible decision early on that it would target those who essentially had nothing: no savings, no assets, no land. Yet the reality is that practically every household on the chars (as everywhere else) owns something. So the line of eligibility had to be drawn arbitrarily. Those households marginally below the threshold were included, while those marginally above were excluded, even though there was no discernible difference between them.

In addition, CLP's targeting (like much poverty targeting globally) looked only at one side of the household balance sheet: its assets. It made no allowance for a household's liabilities, for example, a single mother with a small piece of land but caring for two disabled children who might be excluded because she was marginally above the threshold.

Apart from making the Programme universal (which would have been prohibitively expensive), a sensible approach was to make sure that everyone in the community benefited to some extent from the Programme.

CLP recognised this early on, and was very good at evolving its approach to spread the benefits as widely as possible within the community. There are a significant number of examples of how it achieved this:

- The change of policy from providing high-cost latrines only to beneficiaries, to providing low-cost latrines to the whole community.
- Village Savings and Loan groups established for both core beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.
- Non-beneficiaries being raised onto plinths that were built for their core beneficiary neighbours.
- The market development component with its Char Business Centres, and more generally the establishment of Community-based organisations such as Village Development Committees, which benefitted the community as a whole.

The design of any new programme should place a major emphasis on ensuring that it has substantial elements that are as inclusive of the rest of the community as possible. Activities within the programme that benefit non-beneficiaries and core beneficiaries alike should be seen as a mechanism for ensuring support for the programme, and for better integration of the core beneficiaries into the community, thereby acting as a guarantor of greater programme sustainability.

### TOUGH DECISIONS WILL NEED TO BE MADE ACROSS THE KEY DIMENSIONS OF DEPTH, BREADTH AND LENGTH OF A PROGRAMME

Given a particular budget (even a relatively substantial one like CLP's), a programme has to determine a balance between the amount of benefit it provides (depth), the number of people it gives the benefit to (breadth), and the period over which it gives the benefit (length).

CLP was consistent in its response to the difficult challenge of finding the right balance between depth, breadth and length. It opted for a very generous level of transfer to a relatively substantial proportion of households, but over a fairly short period of time (18-20 months).

The underlying assumption was that there is essentially a tipping point or threshold: if a household could be lifted beyond that by a substantial transfer and intensive support over a short period, then it would become largely self-sustaining, and would not need the continuation of support.

A majority of CLP's Implementing Organisations (IMOs), and some beneficiaries, considered the 18-month period too short. There were some objectives of CLP that required a longer period of support, for example changing deeply entrenched attitudes and traditions such as early marriage, the role of women, and maternal care practices; or the opening up of markets, the establishment of government services, or the reallocation of khas land in the chars.

Different extreme-poor programmes in Bangladesh have adopted different balances between depth, breadth and length. Yet it has always proved difficult to compare them because of different contexts, size of transfer and management approaches. It would be interesting (and could be extremely informative) within any future programme to randomly assign different permutations of support to different households, and to be able to establish whether there were more cost effective approaches.

It would also be sensible to recognise that some changes require a much longer period of support. Rather than adopting the predominant CLP approach of supporting each community for 18 to 24 months, and then essentially moving on to a new community, a future programme might consider how some support services could continue to be offered over a longer period.

## **WHEN WORKING WITH LOCAL NGOS, GIVE CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE**

CLP conducted the majority of its activities through local Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), known as IMOs. They essentially functioned as contractors, with CLP giving them very defined roles and activities without much flexibility. They were strictly monitored, both with regard to their finances and also their field activities. The very term "IMO" seemed to show that they were not really considered as full partners to the Programme, neither by Maxwell Stamp nor by the Government.

One should involve partners in the planning and budgeting processes. In the early days, there was a slight tendency to disguise the fact that it was the "implementing partners" who were doing the bulk of the actual work on the chars. They were often not given very much of the credit: for example, they were rarely mentioned (except as recipients of CLP training or funding), let alone listed or acknowledged, in CLP's annual reports.

Latterly, CLP learnt to give better recognition to the skills of its IMOs, and to involve them in the processes of budgeting and planning, so that they felt like a more integral part of the Programme. The quarterly meetings with all IMO programme managers and all IMO executive directors provided fora for the exchange of views, for lesson-learning, and for bottom-up influencing of the Programme.

Future programmes should build performance-based partnerships with local providers and also include capacity building for partner organisations. They should recognise the accumulated expertise of locally-based NGOs, and establish mechanisms to capture this for cross-learning to inform improved programme design.

## **RECOGNISE THE INCAPACITY PROBLEM**

One of the problems with livelihoods programmes like CLP is that they may not be the best support option for every extremely poor household. When a livelihoods programme is offered in isolation, there is a (wholly understandable) temptation to target it at all of the poorest households, even those that may not be the most appropriate to maximise the potential benefit from it. Some graduation programmes explicitly exclude the elderly and disabled, or pregnant and lactating mothers, while others take the attitude that the only people they would exclude would be the physically bed-ridden. Other projects have tailored their livelihoods interventions specifically to be suitable for disabled persons. Yet it is clear from qualitative research that one of the main reasons behind those who fail to derive benefit from graduation programmes is that they were unsuited from the outset. They have in effect been shoe-horned into an unsuitable intervention, just because they were ultra-poor and therefore deserving of help...and because there was nothing else available to offer them.

CLP tackled this issue head on. It recognised that very little in the way of alternative social welfare exists on the chars; and it therefore explicitly tried to extend the reach of its asset transfers and public works to as many people as possible.

So CLP provided assets and other support to households headed by people with disabilities, to the elderly, and to female-headed households with multiple dependents. It also, at the start, allowed the physically disabled to participate in its Infrastructure Employment Project, paying them the same wage for hours worked as the able-bodied, even though they might have been less productive. It had to change this policy, however, when the infrastructure project switched to being paid on a piece-work basis: at this point it introduced an "incapacity grant" directly paid to those unable to work.

Finally, CLP implemented a range of other mechanisms to support the very poorest who were – for one reason or another – excluded from the main Programme components. These included semi-institutionalised donations (particularly of rice) from beneficiary groups to needy households, a community safety net, and the introduction of ad hoc transfers in times of disaster, such as after severe floods or during the period of rapidly-rising rice prices.

Ideally, graduation programmes should be offered as part of a comprehensive social protection portfolio. Any future livelihoods programme should do whatever is feasible, and necessary, to leverage government social welfare in the areas where it is operating.

This would allow a new livelihoods programme to identify, and focus its efforts on, those households for whom livelihood promotion is the most appropriate intervention – in other words, those among the poor and marginalised who are most likely to make a success of an entrepreneurial opportunity. Any extreme-poor who were believed to be less suited to this could be channelled towards more inclusive, better-run, government entitlements, e.g. for old age allowances, disability grants or child benefits.



### **THE PRIVATE SECTOR HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN A LIVELIHOODS PROGRAMME**

It is increasingly recognised that the private sector can stimulate the local economy and play a role in ensuring that poor people are able to earn more by marketing their goods and services.

CLP activities have resulted in the riverine northern chars having an abundance of cattle for meat and milk which the local market cannot absorb. In order for the beneficiaries to get profitable prices for the meat or milk or any of the other products that they grow or make, they need to be able to supply them to larger buyers who will be able to absorb larger quantities.

How far the private sector will be responsive to the needs and interests of the poor and marginalised, whether their practices will be fair or sustainable, or even if doing business with the poor will be cost effective are all questions that arise. However, recent developments suggest that large agro-processing firms such as Pran, Square and others are sourcing their materials from small and medium farmers; and, in the case of Pran, they are creating their own supply networks and hubs. They are also willing to accept products from groups of poor farmers and suppliers as long as their specifications are met.

### Some of the key lessons:

- CLP helped facilitate the development of input dealers who were based on the chars. Because these businesses made a profit from selling inputs to poor producers there were clear business incentives to carry out this role. In so doing, they increased the productivity and profits of poor producers.
- A central component of CLP's market development strategy was to foster the development of two institutions – business groups and Char Business Centres (CBCs). Business groups operated at village level and were made up of producers from a single sector. They aimed to provide a focal point for producers to interact collectively with traders and input sellers, making it more attractive for other businesses to trade with poor producers. The key feature of the second institution – CBCs – was that they were not only include producers, but input service providers and buyers as well. These actors met regularly to discuss improvements to the way they did business together e.g. producers telling input suppliers how much they wanted to buy and when, so that input suppliers ordered the right amount and delivered on time.
- CLP was also able to work directly with major private sector companies to demonstrate to them that working with CLP beneficiaries, graduates and wider community producers made economic sense e.g. milk producers were getting much better prices for their milk as a result of being linked up, through CBC-facilitated milk collection points that aggregated higher volumes of milk, to the procurement units and chilling plants of the likes of Pran milk, BRAC Dairy and Milk Vita.

- CLP beneficiaries proved to be willing to pay for feed, vaccination services and veterinary services for their livestock, once they realised these services were important to ensure the health and quality of their animals, and therefore the profitability of their enterprises. The use of local providers of services was stimulated by the use of vouchers given to the beneficiaries against which they could avail services. Once they could see the benefits of such services, many demonstrated that they would be more willing to spend their own money on this in future.

Future programmes would need to begin with a thorough assessment of the private sector players, of all sizes and types, active in the geographical areas and related to the livelihoods and market systems that the programme is seeking to support. While market forces might facilitate the marketing of the programme beneficiary services and products, there will probably be the need for government, service providers, NGOs and development programmes to facilitate the linkages and ensure that the rights of the poor are protected and basic minimum standards (e.g. safety, security, fair wages, etc.) are ensured.

If you wish to learn more about CLP or the lessons learnt series of briefs please visit the CLP website [www.clp-bangladesh.org](http://www.clp-bangladesh.org).

Source: Freeland N et al; Mirror, Mirror on the chars: an Operational Review of the Chars Livelihoods Programme; January 2015  
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# Chars Livelihoods Programme

Reducing Extreme Poverty on the Riverine Islands of North West Bangladesh

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