CLP'S EXPERIENCE IN DEVELOPING GRADUATION CRITERIA

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.

This brief is one in a series and shares many lessons and suggestions for those grappling with developing their own graduation criteria.

LESSONS INCLUDE:

Be clear on the purpose of your graduation criteria and ensure stakeholders agree.

Make sure there's 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.

Establish your graduation criteria early on and don't over-review.

Once agreed, make sure staff are aware of the graduation criteria.

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 livelihoods 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. 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.

This particular brief focuses on lessons learnt from developing graduation criteria.

CLP's Graduation Criteria

The programme aimed to provide 78,000 extreme poor core participant households (CPHHs) with an integrated package of support lasting 18 months. Because not all CPHHs could be supported at the same time, six groups (called cohorts) received the package through cohorts averaging 13,000 CPHHs. The Programme's target was for 85% of households to graduate, equivalent to 66,300 households and just over a quarter of a million people.

Despite being active from 2004, it was only in March 2011 that CLP decided to develop a set of graduation criteria and it took until May 2014 for CLP and the donors to finally agree on a set of ten criteria to define graduation. This was, in part, due to the fact that three consecutive annual review teams were tasked with reviewing the criteria, and each review team came up with their own recommendations, which in turn contributed to a delay in their implementation.

The process of developing criteria began in 2011 based on a recommendation made during the March 2011 annual review. A methodology for measuring graduation was developed and reviewed by the subsequent annual review team (March 2012).The annual review team disagreed with the proposed two-step process and the use of different weights for different graduation criteria. They recommended a single-step process and equal weights for all criteria.

A year later, the annual review team of March 2013 was again tasked with reviewing the graduation criteria, which, once again, led to more changes.

Yet more changes were proposed a year later, during the March 2014 annual review, which was again tasked with reviewing the criteria. These changes were, however, relatively minor.

Timeline for Developing Graduation Criteria

April 2010
The second phase
of CLP begins

March 2011
Annual review (AR) team
recommends CLP
develop graduation criteria

March 2012
CLP presents a two-step
approach to graduation

March 2012
AR team recommends
changes (one-step process)

March 2013
AR team tasked with
reviewing graduation criteria

March 2014
AR team tasked with
reviewing graduation criteria

March 2014
Final graduation criteria
and methodology agreed

November 2014
First report published
documenting graduation rates

CLP's final set of graduation criteria related to the multiple dimensions of poverty. Progress in meeting the ten criteria enabled the Programme to assess whether a household was likely to be on the right trajectory out of extreme poverty. The criteria are shown in the table below.

TEN CRITERIA FOR GRADUATION

CRITERIA DOMAIN	CRITERIA
Income/ expenditure/ consumption	**1.** Household has had more than one source of income during the last 30 days
	2. Household eats three meals a day AND consumed five or more food groups in the past week
Nutrition	**3.** Household has access to improved water
	4. Household has access to a sanitary latrine with an unbroken water seal
	5. Presence of ash/ soap near to water point or latrine
Asset base	**6.** Productive assets worth more than Tk 30,000
Status of females	**7.** Participant is able to influence household decisions regarding sale/ purchase of large investments e.g. cattle
Vulnerability	**8.** Homestead is above highest known flood level
	9. Household has cash savings of more than Tk 3,000
Access to services	**10.** Household has membership in a social group

To graduate, a household was required to have met any six of these ten criteria within three months of completing the 18-month cycle.

LESSONS LEARNT

IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE OF HAVING GRADUATION CRITERIA AND ENSURE STAKEHOLDERS AGREE

Make sure key stakeholders (donors, government and programme staff) are in agreement with and fully understand the purpose of the graduation criteria. Make sure you consult with them thoroughly and reach a common understanding of the purpose of having graduation criteria.

For example, it is important to determine whether the criteria will be used as a proxy for poverty or as a set of measurements to judge the Programme's efficiency in delivering outputs. The choice will have an impact on which criteria are selected, and their thresholds. For example, if the criteria are being used as a proxy for poverty, they might be more outcomes-based. If they are more a mechanism for judging delivery perfor-mance, then they are likely to be more output focused.

CLP's criteria were used to assess whether a household was likely to be on the right trajectory out of extreme poverty and whether the Programme had delivered what it intended to. They were, therefore, a combination of output and outcome indicators.

ESTABLISH THE GRADUATION CRITERIA EARLY ON AND DON'T OVER-REVIEW

CLP's final graduation criteria and approach to measurement was only agreed to in early 2014, just over halfway through the second phase.

The fact that the criteria were reviewed by three consecutive annual review teams meant they were in a continuous state of flux. In CLP's experience, different development practitioners have a different idea of what graduation means and how it should be measured. Practitioners must develop a logical and defendable set of criteria, with broad stakeholder involvement, and then "stick to their guns". Don't over-review the criteria at the risk of not gathering any data at all!

ENSURE THERE IS A LOGIC TO THE CRITERIA AND THEIR RELEVANT THRESHOLDS

Bearing in mind the fact that practitioners will all have a different opinion of what should/should not be included as a criteria, it is important to develop a set of criteria that are logical and defendable. What is the best way to achieve this?

If you're clear on the purpose of your graduation criteria then this will obviously go a long way in helping you select criteria and thresholds. Try and include the community in setting criteria and thresholds, i.e. seek their opinion. This applies in particular if the criteria are being used as a proxy for poverty.

CLP learnt that it's important to back up the choice of thresholds with research, wherever possible. For example, CLP's Graduation Criteria 9 states: "Household has cash savings of Tk 3,000." In hindsight,CLP selected this threshold (Tk 3,000) without sufficient information and understanding of the reality on the ground. The moni-toring data showed that many households were not achieving this threshold, which did not necessarily mean it was wrong. It could simply have been that households moving out of extreme poverty chose not to hold (relatively) large cash savings, preferring instead to buy small assets such as poultry and goats. More research was required.

In another example, Graduation Criteria 6 states: "Productive assets worth more than Tk 30,000". Again, CLP found that many households did not meet this threshold at the end of 18-month support period, i.e. the point at which "official" graduation rates were calculated. The main reason for this was that there simply wasn't sufficient time to achieve this target and participants needed more time to accumulate such assets. The data in the follow-up annual surveys showed this clearly. Therefore, the threshold of Tk 30,000 in assets at the 18 months mark was, in hindsight, overambitious.

THINK THROUGH THE LOGISTICS OF DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

Agreeing on a set of graduation criteria is one thing; it's also extremely important to think through 1) who will collect the data 2) the frequency of data collection 3) whether data will be collected after support has ended (i.e. addressing issues of sustainability), etc.

It's probably fair to say that CLP did not give this sufficient thought in the early days and that things evolved. The initial idea was to collect graduation rates on an annual basis for each cohort. The problem with this approach was that CLP would have ended up by having constantly-changing graduation rates. In 2014 CLP decided that graduation rates would be established at the end of the 18-month period of support and that these rates would not change. Importantly, however, CLP would follow up on a sample of households, by cohort annually, to assess sustainability.

The approach to data collection also had an impact on Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) resources. CLP was initially encouraged by the donors to develop a set of criteria that were objectively verifiable, easy to collect and that could be administered to all households on a census basis. As time progressed and more and more people had an input,CLP moved away from this ideal for a number of reasons:

- Gathering information from all households would have requiredfield staff (Community Development Officers) to collect the data. This process was deemed too vulnerable to manipulation.
- It is not always possible to have good indicators that are objectively verifiable, e.g. amount of cash savings (Criteria 9) and degree of influence on household decisions (Criteria 7).
- It is not always possible to find good indicators that are also "easy" to collect. For example, CLP started with "having an acceptable food consumption score", which is a rich indicator, telling you about quality and diversity of food consumed. Later, however,it was decided that a simpler approach was required and "number of meals / day and food groups eaten"was selected as an alternative.

CHANGES TO THE LOGFRAME CAN AFFECT THE GRADUATION CRITERIA

Some of CLP's graduation criteria were also included within the Programme's Logical Framework (LogFrame) as indicators, especially those related to assets and cash savings. It may be an obvious point, but it's important to make sure the thresholds (targets) of the graduation criteria are the same as those that appear in the LogFrame. If not, you'll be "chasing" different targets.

ONCE AGREED, MAKE SURE STAFF ARE AWARE OF THE GRADUATION CRITERIA

The percentage of households graduating from CLP was a headline indicator for the Programme. Because the graduation criteria were a combination of output and outcome indicators, CLP could, inpart, be held responsible for achieving them. It was, therefore, important that staff and management were aware of the criteria so that 1) they knew what their individual and team contribution was, and 2) they could tangibly appreciate what the importance of their contribution was. CLP realised that this could also motivate staff to ensure quality and place greater emphasis on ensuring "their" criteria were met.

TRACK SUSTAINABILITY OF GRADUATION

CLP2 supported just over 78,000 CPHHs in total. These households were supported in six annual groups, known as cohorts, each group averaging 13,000 households. Support lasted for 18 months per cohort. Graduation rates were established for each cohort within three months of Programme support ending. This is important, but it's also equally important to track sustainability of graduation.

CLP tracked a sample of households through annual surveys. The number of households who met 6+ graduation criteria from a sample of CLP1 households and who ended support 4.5 to 7 years previously were also tracked. This was done 1) to understand which indicators were / were not being met 2) to understand whether CLP's logic model was right or not. Tracking sustainability of graduation obviously took M&E resources and should be factored in when designing the graduation criteria and methodology.

If you wish to learn more about CLP or the lessons learnt series of briefs please visit the CLP website www.clp-bangladesh.org.

Author: Stuart Kenward
Editor: Tanya Goodman

Chars Livelihoods Programme

Reducing Extreme Poverty on the Riverine Islands of North West Bangladesh