



CLP'S EXPERIENCE IN DEVELOPING M&E SYSTEMS

SUMMARY

After operating from 2004 – 2016, the Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) 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 Monitoring & Evaluation issues.

LESSONS INCLUDE:



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 attribution.



Develop a set of themes for packaging information.



Involve the community in setting indicators and thresholds (targets).



Integrate M&E and Communications functions.



Outsource the quality control of activities/ outputs.



Develop a simple activity/ output monitoring system and don't overdo it.

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 (RDCCD) 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 monitoring and evaluation systems (M&E).

CLP'S INNOVATION, MONITORING, LEARNING AND COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION

CLP's Innovation, Monitoring, Learning and Communications Division (IMLC) was one of four Divisions; the others were the Finance, Operations and Partnerships Divisions.

As the name suggests, the IMLC was responsible for M&E and Communications. The principal activities of the Division were:

- Coordinating activity/ output monitoring (against targets in the Logical Framework)
- Research
- Outcome/ impact monitoring
- Communications
- Managing all datasets (including registration data on all core participant households)

The IMLC, located in Bogra at CLP Secretariat, was headed by a Director with a direct reporting line to the Team Leader. Two Unit Managers, one for Communications and one for M&E, reported to the IMLC Director.

International Young Professionals (IYPs) were also attached to the Division and they proved a valuable resource in terms of support for research and communications activities. They were awarded contracts of one year with the possibility of extension.

Each Implementing Organisation (IMO) employed a Data Entry and Monitoring Officer (DEMO) on behalf of IMLC. These DEMOs were responsible for data collection and data entry.



MONITORING & EVALUATION TIMELINE

October 2006	First International Young Professionals recruited
June 2008	Verification contractor recruited for first time
March 2010	First Communications Unit Manager recruited
October 2010	Rolling baseline introduced
October 2010	First survey which followed-up on previous cohorts
October 2010	Annual surveys introduced (baseline + follow up)
October 2012	Five thematic areas (used to "package" outcome information) introduced
March 2014	Graduation criteria agreed

LESSONS LEARNT

CLP had a rigorous monitoring and evaluation system to assess all of its activities. The system had two major components. The first was regular or output monitoring, under which data was collected on the progress of CLP's major outputs, such as the numbers of plinths raised, tubewells installed, social development groups formed, and so on. The IMLC unit produced monthly progress reports and other materials from this monitoring.

The second component was outcome monitoring. This aimed to assess the long-term outcomes of the programme. IMLC commissioned annual surveys, thematic research projects and other studies under this component. All of this activity was aimed at answering

the simple questions: how are we doing and what impact are we having? The analyses were used to tell CLP staff what changes were taking place and what they could do differently to achieve better outcomes.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION CAN, AND SHOULD, BE MEASURED BY MORE THAN INDICATORS OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURE

Collecting reliable information on income and expenditure from extreme-poor households had its limitations. For example, there were often recall issues and some respondents may have been reticent to fully disclose their earnings. During the analysis there were then issues about what to include/ exclude as income, e.g. should in-kind income be included or excluded?

Headline indicators for CLP1 and CLP2 (at least during the first couple of years of the second phase) related to changes in income and expenditure and the number of people lifted out of extreme poverty (based on reference to a national poverty line). However, making comparisons to a national income poverty line also had its limitations. For the results to be comparable, the data collection tools and approach to analysis needed to be identical.

Bearing in mind the limitations outlined above there was perhaps too much emphasis on these indicators. This was certainly evident in CLP1 when the Programme's performance was largely judged against income and expenditure alone. Income and expenditure are important indicators but there are many other significant indicators that can and should be tracked with equal emphasis.

After much research, discussion and debate, and approximately halfway through its second phase, the Programme introduced a set of ten equally-weighted graduation criteria against which households could be judged. These criteria related not only to 1) Income/ expenditure/ consumption, but also to 2) Nutrition 3) Asset base 4) Status of females 5) Vulnerability, and 6) Access to services. A household needed to meet any six of the criteria to be termed "graduated". By introducing this broader range of criteria CLP was able to capture far more than the traditional measures of income and expenditure, and was able to include other forms of progress. This enabled the Programme to assess whether a household was likely to be on the right trajectory out of extreme poverty.

THE ROLLING BASELINE CAN BE A GOOD ALTERNATIVE TO PURE CONTROL GROUPS

As with all development projects interested in trying to demonstrate attribution, CLP considered different approaches. During CLP1 the pipeline control was introduced. In simple terms, this is where the baseline condition of new entrants into the programme is used as a "control" against which to measure the progress made by earlier entrants.

The first and second phases of CLP supported 133,000 core participant households (CPHHS). These households were supported through annual intakes, referred to as cohorts, of which there were ten. The fact that households were being supported through annual cohorts provided the opportunity to use the pipeline control approach.

The second phase of CLP continued to use the approach based on the advantages it offered:

- No ethical concerns
- Relatively straightforward to understand
- CLP had several years of experience in using this methodology

At the time, there was also support from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), who described it as "innovative" and "best practice".

With experience, however, CLP also learnt that the pipeline control had some noteworthy limitations:

- When comparing the baseline status of new entrants with CPHHs who had already received CLP support, inflation could be built into income and expenditure but not social indicators.
- The ideal situation would have been to collect baseline data on a control and treatment group with the same characteristics at the same point in time. With the pipeline control methodology, the status of new entrants, say at year three, was assumed to be the "same" as it was for CPHHs who had been in the project for three years. This might not always be the case.
- If more than one cohort was drawn from the same village there may have been a spill-over effect on the latest cohorts. To counter this effect, from Cohort 2.3, CLP's policy was to not return to villages in which it had already worked.

Recognising that the methodology lacked some rigour, as compared to randomised control trials for example, an impact assessment of CLP1 attempted to overcome the problem by using advanced statistical methods, i.e. Propensity Score Matching.

In summary, CLP learnt that the pipeline control does have its advantages. It also, however, has limitations but these can be addressed, to some extent, by using more advanced analytical tools.

DEVELOP THEMES AROUND WHICH YOU CAN PACKAGE INFORMATION

As with most Programmes, CLP2 had a logical Framework (LogFrame) that was updated from time to time.

During the first year of CLP2, IMLC collected information related strictly to the Log Frame indicators and reported against these as required, for example, during the annual review. The problem with this was that several outcome and impact indicators didn't offer a detailed enough picture of the realities on the ground. To counter this, in early 2012, IMLC identified themes around which research was to be conducted and progress monitored. The choice of research focus was, of course, driven by multiple demands.

The key thematic areas were related to the Programme's logic model and served as a focal point for packaging information. These themes were: Women's Empowerment, Water Sanitation and Hygiene, Livelihoods, Nutrition and Food Security. The theme of Graduation was added in 2014.

These themes became the pillars around which the

Programme collated and disseminated information. The advantage of doing this was that the Programme gained a much deeper understanding of its results in these areas. For example, prior to developing the themes, CLP was tracking just a couple of indicators related to Food Security. After developing the themes, the Programme began to monitor multiple Food Security indicators.

The themes also enabled the Programme to develop a range of communications products and reports that allowed CLP to better target its information and dissemination to other specialists in the development field.

CONSIDER COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SETTING CRITERIA AND THRESHOLDS

During the early days of CLP2, IMLC attempted to assess the extent to which the Programme had empowered women. A review of the literature, an exploration of what other Programmes were doing to measure women's empowerment, and internal discussions resulted in the production of a very long questionnaire (over 200 questions), which took far too long to administer. Whilst the questionnaire collected some very interesting information on different aspects of empowerment, there was no real way, at the end of the interview, of concluding whether the interviewee was empowered or not.

Another issue with the methodology was that the questions were developed without considering the chars context. Women's empowerment is situation specific: the criteria to define an empowered woman in the UK are different to those used to define an empowered woman in Bangladesh, let alone a woman living on the chars. Another problem with the approach was that it was far too reliant on quantitative data.

Not happy with its approach to measuring women's empowerment, IMLC tried to think through an alternative approach. The goal was to find something that was simpler but that also considered what it meant to be empowered for extreme-poor women living on the chars of northwestern Bangladesh.

With support from the Human Development Unit, IMLC embarked on an important piece of qualitative research, collecting information from young, old, poor, the not-so-poor, males and females on the chars. The aim was to find out how they defined women's empowerment. This culminated in the Chars Empowerment Scorecard: a set of ten criteria to define women's empowerment. IMLC supplemented the findings from the scorecard with a number of qualitative studies.

Of course, the Scorecard isn't perfect. It is, however, to some extent defensible: it is context specific; it has been developed by the community; it is underpinned by solid research; and it is relatively easy to administer (at least compared to the initial approach).

The community can and should be consulted in defining indicators (and thresholds) of success. Far too often development practitioners set the indicators, for example those contained in LogFrames, with little or no community consultation.

DEVELOP AN ACTIVITY/ OUTPUT MONITORING SYSTEM BUT DON'T OVERDO IT!

IMLC was responsible for coordinating a monthly progress report (MPR), which was published on the 10th of every month. This MPR tracked progress against quarterly targets, annual targets and overall CLP2 targets for approximately 120 indicators; even more when some of the indicators were disaggregated by gender.

Each month IMLC collected the relevant information from the three Operational Unit Managers. The Unit Managers collected the information from the relevant District staff who, in turn, collected the information from the Implementing Organisations (IMOs). Essentially they drew on their own internal project monitoring systems.

It is fair to say there were problems with some of the data presented in the MPR almost on a monthly basis. For example:

- The quarterly targets provided by the Unit Managers were not always updated and the issue would only be raised at the end of the quarter (and sometimes not at all).
- Problems were often found after the report had been published.

Part of the challenge lay in the sheer number of indicators. To some extent the Operational Units felt that the higher the number of indicators included in the MPR the better the amount of work they were doing could be illustrated. What they didn't realise was the burden of having to report on the indicators each month. In hindsight it would have probably been better to reduce the number of indicators to just those included in the Log Frame (at output level) and perhaps add another ten key indicators, relating to high-cost activities or activities that were of particular interest to donors and government. Of course, the Operational Units would still have had their internal output monitoring systems for each project, but they would not have had to report results on a monthly basis for the MPR.

OUTSOURCE OUTPUT QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

CLP operated in an environment that could lead to fraud and quality issues: the Programme worked with a lot of different people at multiple IMOs (between 9-18 at any given stage) and a significant staff complement (of up to 1,400). Over time, CLP put in place different systems to mitigate these risks. For example, district managers were tasked with playing an oversight role, and significant resources were devoted to staff training (and re-training). That said, where there's a will there's a way and the sad reality is that some fraud always takes place and quality is not always up to the desired standard.

From the beginning, IMLC had a role to play in developing and implementing quality control and fraud mitigation measures. The Division contracted an independent company to verify, each month, a sample of activities/ outputs delivered by the IMOs during the previous

month. Any issues arising were reported to the IMLC Director who passed them on to relevant staff for further investigation.

The independent contractor employed a number of enumerators who made spot checks each month. An effective strategy was to make sure that the enumerators did not publicise when or where they would visit. The threat of a third party "verifier" turning up unexpectedly to interview a CLP-supported household, asking questions about quality and quantity, acted as an effective deterrent to leakage. This type of verification process also helped promote quality outputs and activities.

The problem with this approach, however, was that there could be a significant gap between fraud actually taking place and a case being identified and reported (because of the time lag between outputs being delivered and verification taking place). CLP, therefore, decided to introduce additional verification surveys, termed Customer Satisfaction Surveys, which were primarily focused on the high-cost activities, such as cash-for-work and asset transfer. Furthermore, these were rolled out whilst the activity (cash-for-work, for example) was ongoing, not a month or two later.

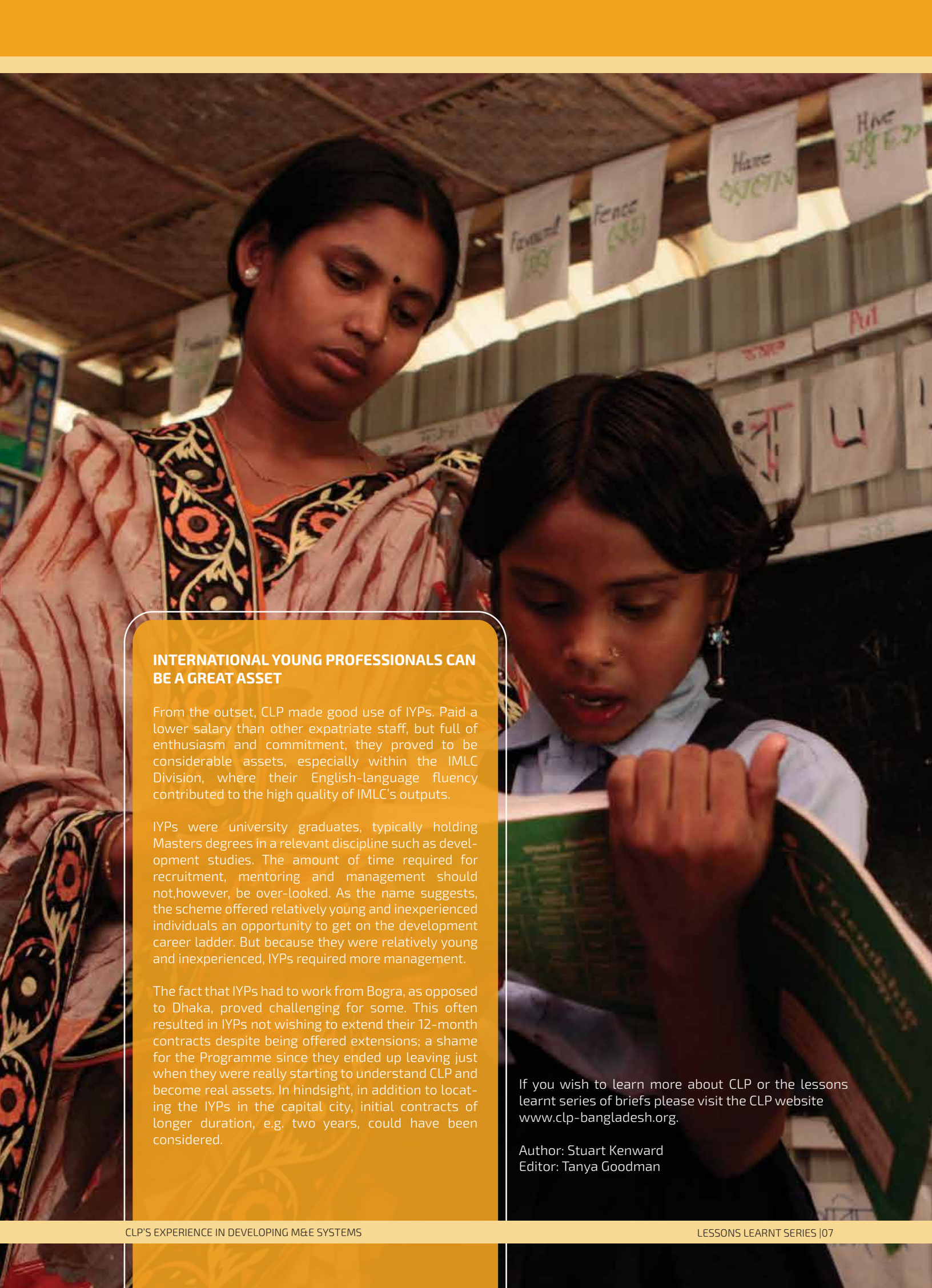
INTEGRATE THE COMMUNICATIONS WITH M&E FUNCTIONS

CLP established a Communications Unit at the start of the second phase (April 2010) to help consolidate and disseminate all the information that was being gathered. The Unit comprised a Unit Manager and had support from the IYPs (normally two at any time) and managed a relatively small budget. The Unit was tasked with maintaining CLP website and developing materials such as briefs, e-newsletters, etc. The Unit was located within the IMLC Directorate, alongside the M&E Unit.

There were certain advantages to locating the M&E and Communications functions side-by-side (reporting to the same Director):

- much of the communications materials relied on data produced by the M&E Unit;
- the timing of the release of M&E data could be well coordinated

Recruiting quality Communications staff proved challenging for CLP. Part of the reason for this was the Programme's location in Bogra. In hindsight, and because a significant portion of communications work, such as writing, could be done from Dhaka, this position should have been located for most of the time in the capital. This might have resulted in CLP being able to attract staff of a higher calibre.



INTERNATIONAL YOUNG PROFESSIONALS CAN BE A GREAT ASSET

From the outset, CLP made good use of IYPs. Paid a lower salary than other expatriate staff, but full of enthusiasm and commitment, they proved to be considerable assets, especially within the IMLC Division, where their English-language fluency contributed to the high quality of IMLC's outputs.

IYPs were university graduates, typically holding Masters degrees in a relevant discipline such as development studies. The amount of time required for recruitment, mentoring and management should not, however, be over-looked. As the name suggests, the scheme offered relatively young and inexperienced individuals an opportunity to get on the development career ladder. But because they were relatively young and inexperienced, IYPs required more management.

The fact that IYPs had to work from Bogra, as opposed to Dhaka, proved challenging for some. This often resulted in IYPs not wishing to extend their 12-month contracts despite being offered extensions; a shame for the Programme since they ended up leaving just when they were really starting to understand CLP and become real assets. In hindsight, in addition to locating the IYPs in the capital city, initial contracts of longer duration, e.g. two years, could have been considered.

If you wish to learn more about CLP or the lessons learnt series of briefs 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

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