



CLP'S EXPERIENCE IN FORGING PARTNERSHIPS

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 forging good partnerships.

LESSONS INCLUDE:



Recognise that additional resources from other organisations will be required to sustain outcomes.



Forging long-term relationships depends in part on regulatory frameworks.



Developing partnerships is more than a technical skill, it requires real relationships to be developed.



Plan ahead about how to form partnerships.



Find ways to improve and incentivise sustainability.



View partnerships as if you are selling a "product".



Always be thinking about partnership potential.

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 developing partnerships.

PARTNERSHIPS

The Partnerships Division of CLP was focused on identifying and working with a variety of stakeholders to produce linkages and/or provide additional resources to the chars. These resources ranged from improved goods and works to services and were aimed at assisting char-dwellers to continue their journey out of poverty.



As part of its Partnerships plan, CLP refined and developed a number of strategic principles to guide the development of these relationships and activities. These principles were centred on the following priorities:



Supporting the sustainability of CLP's achievements



Continuing or increasing outcomes / impacts



Targeting strategically-chosen organisational partners, particularly those with the mandate or aim of developing long-term and sustainable relationships and activities in the chars



Minimising the requirement for CLP to commit significant direct funding, or to play an unsustainable role (i.e. being a central implementation agent such that any agreement or activity would fail once CLP wrapped up operations)



Bringing additional resources and/or partners to the chars



Supporting access to basic services (e.g. health and education) where possible



Creating sustainable linkages between CLP-supported community-based organisations, entrepreneurs, service providers etc



Being practical and "doable" in the time and with the resources remaining to CLP



LESSONS LEARNT

CLP achieved some significant successes in its partnerships activities, such as transferring some of the pilot education centres to be run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs); working closely with health providers to provide additional eye care and cleft palate operations; and encouraging sustainable linkages with major commercial agricultural enterprises. However, CLP also learnt a few lessons along the way.

RECOGNISE THAT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM OTHER ORGANISATIONS WILL BE REQUIRED TO SUSTAIN OUTCOMES

An obvious first lesson is that CLP had to focus its efforts on organisations that could bring additional resources. If CLP had to fund a specific programme, or had to play a critical role in implementation, then it was less likely to be a sustainable activity. CLP ended in March 2016, and thus certain activities would run the risk of having to cease if additional resources weren't identified. Because of this constraint, CLP did not go forward with some interventions, despite a demonstrated interest in them, because after protracted negotiations it turned out that CLP needed to provide significant and non-sustainable levels of funding or implementation of activities.

FIND WAYS TO IMPROVE AND INCENTIVISE SUSTAINABILITY

Ensuring that there was an incentive or other factor to drive sustainability was also a critical factor. In CLP's market-based projects, the incentive was relatively clear: commercial and financial organisations could

develop markets and make profits from closer linkages and relationships with producers, suppliers and CLP-supported institutions, such as the Chars Business Centres. With CLP's various other partnerships, such as in health and education, the sustainability came from the organisation's mandate and focus on providing such services.

However, it must always be remembered that NGOs may face sustainability issues when or if donor / supporter funding levels fluctuate. Similarly, market-based actors face the vagaries of economic ups-and-downs. This should not be a reason not to go ahead; it just means that reasonable strategic plans and forward planning horizons need to be devised.

For the education sector in particular, time-bound programmes such as CLP are not an effective way to provide education services, which must be long-term. CLP did not have a specific partnerships strategy focusing solely on education. Developing one might have helped CLP to work more closely with various education stakeholders (government, NGOs, donors) in a more coherent fashion, thus driving greater impact. However, planners and implementers should always bear in mind whether it is desirable or feasible to have a livelihoods-focused programme such as CLP becoming involved in sectors such as education.





VIEW PARTNERSHIPS AS IF YOU ARE SELLING A "PRODUCT"

CLP also assessed that, when it came to partnerships, it was, to a certain extent, selling a "product". In the markets arena, it was the institutions, producers, suppliers and other actors that CLP worked with to boost their business-oriented skills and abilities. Institutions, such as the Chars Business Centres that CLP helped establish and train; Livestock Services Providers, that became sustainable microenterprises on the chars; and Chars Input Dealers, who sold agricultural inputs on the chars, among others; all came to represent potentially profitable markets and dependable actors with whom to develop mutually beneficial commercial relationships.

In other developmental areas, CLP was "selling" the expertise and professionalism of partner NGOs, many of whom now have years of experience in implementing high-quality development activities. For potential funders such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments or even the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), this network of NGOs can now help them to achieve their mandate. CLP's unique selling point was, therefore, that we could facilitate sustainable relationships between these actors and help them work together to design, implement and monitor development-oriented activities in the chars well into the future.

FORGING LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS DEPENDS IN PART ON REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

The capacity of CLP to help forge relationships for the long-term was aided by regulatory frameworks and formal governmental budgets that were in place to encourage development. The Bank of Bangladesh, the country's central bank, for example, had regulations in place that encouraged banks and other financial institutions to donate towards CSR activities. It also expected allocations towards certain sectors, such as health and education, and has also dedicated over Tk 2 billion (£17.39m) for low-interest loans, subsidised by the Ministry of Finance, for livestock development. The GoB also announced during June 2015 that there was a fund of Tk 500m (£4.35m) allocated to development of remote and under-developed regions, such as the chars. These represented concrete opportunities to access resources to support development activities.

PLAN AHEAD ABOUT HOW TO FORM PARTNERSHIPS

While these initiatives, regulations and budgets certainly helped, there were some challenges too. CLP made contact with CSR partners relatively late in its implementation cycle: the last year of its operations. However, like any partners, CSR donors had project life-cycles that needed to be integrated. This meant that, for some CSR stakeholders, CLP missed the funding cycle and so activities could not begin immediately. There is little doubt that if CLP had started targeting such partners earlier, a greater number of activities could have been supported, and thus the impact increased.

However, this also illustrates another couple of lessons. While the Partnerships Division always had a strategic framework in place, the linkage between CLP and CSR partners largely came from previous connections made by the Partnerships Director who only joined CLP during 2015. CSR partners had not been a high-profile target for CLP prior to this, in part because those connections and contacts were not present in the team.

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS IS MORE THAN A TECHNICAL SKILL; IT REQUIRES REAL RELATIONSHIPS TO BE DEVELOPED

Although CLP had known about CSR activities for some time, and had tried to develop partnerships in this area, a boost came with the appointment of a new Partnerships Director who brought additional contacts and a good understanding of the CSR sector in Bangladesh.

This illustrates that the Partnerships approach needs to be flexible, to accommodate such circumstances when they arise. It also shows that the Partnerships Director role is one that requires skills, experience and connections beyond technical knowledge of the development or commercial sector. The ability to be able to develop such

connections and be taken seriously in various different circles is extremely important. The person responsible for helping to forge partnerships needs to know the "market" and have the ability to generate real relationships, which means the role is as much about liaison and linkages as it is about technical or management skills. It is arguable that without this aspect, CLP would not have been able to generate partnership interest amongst CSR stakeholders.

Liaising with Government and accessing development funds beyond those of CLP also presented challenges. While the GoB may have delineated a budget line for development, nevertheless CLP struggled to work out how to access it. It was not clear what processes and pro-formas needed to be used, who could make applications and how, which Ministries these applications should go to, and so on. Getting this information required political and bureaucratic knowledge from outside of CLP's home Ministry, which took time to access. This is in itself a lesson – programmes need to ensure that Partnerships activities are given sufficient time to come to fruition and are realistic. It also highlights the previous lesson again – connections, knowledge and the ability to open doors are extremely important.

ALWAYS BE THINKING ABOUT PARTNERSHIP POTENTIAL

A final lesson is that one should always try to maximise partnership opportunities from all potential sources. It is likely that CLP did not make sufficient effort to liaise with different development divisions within its own donors, like UKaid and Australian Aid. It is true that the Partnerships function was focused on accessing additional resources outside its immediate donors. Nevertheless, greater contact with the health, education, private sector and climate change functions with "insiders" may have generated ideas, contacts or information on additional resources that would not otherwise arise.

A caveat could be added here, however, that CLP has always had only one position focused solely on Partnerships, and only later in the programme's life was the Partnerships function given greater priority. Given limited resources, difficult decisions always needed to be made on how and where to best focus efforts. Overall, however, CLP learnt that Partnerships are a vital tool in helping to deliver and sustain efforts to reduce extreme poverty.

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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