SHOUHARDO: A Holistic Approach Ensuring Food Security through Women's Empowerment

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What is the general context in which the story takes place?

Bangladesh has made significant progress in reducing poverty, but is still one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world, with 31.5 percent of its 157 million people living below the poverty line. CARE is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty. Founded in 1949, CARE Bangladesh is one of the organization's oldest and largest country offices. CARE Bangladesh's holistic food security and development programming encompasses income generation and market linkages, health and hygiene, participatory governance, women's empowerment, education, climate change adaptation, and emergency response.

CARE Bangladesh implemented the first phase of Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) from 2004 to 2010. This five-year initiative proved to be one of the most successful food and nutrition programs in the world. Funded by USAID, with a 10 percent contribution from the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), this $126 million program successfully reduced the prevalence of stunting and demonstrated an implementation model that could deliver services to more than 400,000 households in 18 of the poorest and hardest to reach areas.

The SHOUHARDO II Program (2010-2015), builds on these proven models to provide one of the largest non-emergency food security programs in the world. Funded by USAID, the GoB, and CARE USA for a budget of $129 million, it operates in the North Char, Mid Char, Haor belt, and the Cox's Bazaar coastal area, covering 11 districts, 30 Upazilas, and 172 unions. SHOUHARDO II focuses on reaching the most socially, economically, and politically marginalized women, the rural extreme poor and communities prone to disasters and environmental change.

What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

Empowering people (women, men, girls, and boys) and communities is central to the SHOUHARDO II approach. The program believes that empowerment is the driving force in people centered development. It sees knowledge

and learning as the key stepping stones within the empowerment process. As such, knowledge management and learning is at the heart of the SHOUHARDO II approach. In this phase of the program, staff has worked to further refine their approach based on the learning and knowledge acquired during Phase I. The program continues to deepen its awareness of what practices work, to explore new and innovative ways to apply this awareness, and, where appropriate, undertake research on the effectiveness of an approach in a given context. In doing this, SHOUHARDO II leverages the knowledge generated to achieve its overall goal of "Transforming the lives of 370,000 Poor and Extreme Poor (PEP) households (HH) in 11 of the poorest and marginalized districts in Bangladesh by reducing their vulnerability to food insecurity."

At its core, the SHOUHARDO II program believes:

- Without knowledge, we are not able to produce evidence of impact.
- Greater focus and having a concrete knowledge management strategy will foster individual and professional growth among the SHOUHARDO II staff, including its key partners.
- Having a knowledge management focus within the program assists staff to remain accountable to the communities the program serves.

This prompted the team to have a strong focus on knowledge management and generating evidence. This involved work across external evaluators, USAID staff, CARE and partner staff, and program beneficiaries. Providing strong evidence in the development and government context ensures that resources can be focused toward the most promising approaches.

Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.

The program uses a combination of approaches to build its focus on CLA to build a comprehensive strategy, including:

Community Action Plan: The Community Action Plan (CAP) is a part of the community consultation process done at the initial stage of enrolling communities in the SHOUHARDO II. The CAP is developed using a participatory approach in which community members sit together and identify their needs and pathways for action. As the entire process is designed to be participatory, it creates a sense of ownership among the participants. The approach also helps communities to internalize their plans and to take responsibility for their implementation and maintenance. SHOUHARDO II forms Village Development Committees (VDC) from a cross-section of the community as the fundamental "vehicle for development" to bring about catalytic changes needed in their communities and take the lead role on the CAP.

Landscape Analysis: SHOUHARDO II captures ongoing activities and issue-based events in the form of keynote papers and reports and disseminates these to a wider audience through seminars, round table dialogues, and other contemporary forms of discussion and dialogue. The approach used for disseminating information varies based on the target audience. The program also uses tools such as small-scale research and brainstorming sessions to capture and document key practices and learning while exploring possible ways of improving programmatic implementation.

Impact Studies: Impact studies are designed to focus on specific areas of learning. These studies take an in-depth approach to looking at a particular theme or issue. SHOUHARDO II management facilitates organizational learning, allowing the program to review successes and failures and sharing learning to improve performance and influencing others through advocacy.

Program Evaluation: SHOUHARDO II has a three-tiered program evaluation approach composed of a baseline survey, a mid-term review, and a final evaluation using external evaluators. The baseline provided a benchmark on key indicators and a point of reference to measure future achievements. The mid-term review was critical to assess the effectiveness in implementing activities and reaching output targets. It also helped assess if intermediate results were appropriate to achieve the desired changes. It helped clarify which approaches, interventions, and activities have proven most effective, as well as those that have failed to be as effective. The

mid-term review has helped to identify the important roles partners play in program implementation and highlighted the added value alliances with PNGOs, government, and technical partners bring to the success of the program. The recommendations from the review are important in making the necessary changes to the program design to ensure the program meets its key outcomes.

Gender Analysis: CARE's Gender Analysis Framework (GAF) is an important tool to systematically analyze gender relations within a community and identify issues and barriers facing women in the community. During program startup, a Gender Analysis (GA) was completed for all 1,509 target villages through a participatory process that required each community to analyze their respective gender issues. Subsequently, the Village Development Committees (VDCs) incorporated the GA findings in their action plans and designed respective activities to overcome the many barriers faced by women and girls.

Cross Visits/Peer Learning: SHOUHARDO II creates immense opportunity for learning, due to its volume of operation, integration of diverse objectives, huge target population, immense area coverage, and contextual diversities. The program encourages cross visits among beneficiaries, staff, service providers, and government officials relevant to program operations. This opportunity of cross learning strengthens program implementation as it scales up good practices, enhances the scope of replicating new ideas, and strengthens the knowledge on diverse programmatic issues.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?

Key to program success is the holistic approach through the five strategic objectives: agriculture and livelihoods; health, hygiene, and nutrition; women and girl's empowerment; governance; and resilience (disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation). The program is designed to provide a "big push" at a local level over an extended period in the hope of unlocking a poverty trap with longer-term development objectives integrated into the near-term support activities.

Also critical to the success of SHOUHARDO II is active community participation. The program prioritizes capacity building and participatory processes by forming VDCs of members from a cross section of the community to assess local factors constraining food security and oversee program efforts to address them (e.g., community-led infrastructure initiatives). The VDCs, with program staff, also coordinate the efforts of Core Occupational Groups, Growth Monitoring and Promotion groups, Early Childhood Community Development groups, and Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Action (EKATA) groups.

The EKATA groups serve as the core component of the SHOUHARDO II women's empowerment strategy. The effective process for empowering women and girls is customized based on the needs of each community, with EKATA group members defining the meaning of their own empowerment and acting upon their plan. Evaluation has shown that villages with EKATA groups also saw greater improvements across women's access to and control over income and resources, women's leadership, women's and children's health, and violence against women in comparison to villages without groups.

The EKATA groups highlight the continuous adaptation of the program through knowledge sharing and learning. The EKATA model originated from the SHOUHARDO Program's mandate to move away from the traditional focus on construction to a more human focus. The design team took experiences and elements from Reflect (Action Aid), Peoples Driven Development Approach (DASCOH), and Adult Literacy Approach (Concern Worldwide) to develop the EKATA model, in which participation was the core value. This model was refined over time based on the recommendations made by various independent studies of the 400 EKATA groups from four diverse regions of the SHOUHARDO Program.

Partnerships also played a significant role in achieving results. Sixteen national NGOs with established presence and strong reputations in target districts deliver 90 percent of program activities. The project also collaborates with 14 government ministries that provide oversight and play practical facilitating roles at multiple levels.

What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

The program's focus on knowledge management has allowed for the discovery and advocacy around key project learning.

External evaluators and impact studies showed that in less than four years, the stunting rate among children 6 to 24 months old in the target population had fallen from 56.1 percent to 40.4 percent. As an annual stunting reduction of 4.5 percentage points, it dwarfed the 0.1 percentage point decline in Bangladesh as a whole and easily bested the 2.4 percentage point annual decline seen in the average USAID food security program.

"I was concerned that something was wrong with the data," said Lisa Smith, a senior economist at a consulting firm Technical Assistance for Non-Governmental Organizations (TANGO International). "The magnitude of the drop-off was just so big."

The evaluation also offered an explanation, part of it being the comprehensive nature of the program with the wide array of interventions, including maternal and child health and nutrition, sanitation, homestead food production, income generation, village savings and loans groups, institutional strengthening, and climate change adaptation. But because detailed data were collected as part of SHOUHARDO, the program's evaluators were able to determine that another force had actually produced the greatest independent impact: The game changer was women's empowerment.

Evaluation of SHOUHARDO II also saw a significant 21 percent reduction of stunting in children under 5. Other impressive results included:

- Increased average household income by 79 percent
- Increased number of households growing vegetables by 281 percent
- Increased market access by 39 percent
- Increased average household dietary diversity score by 81 percent
- Increased access to improved sanitation facilities by 160 percent
- Increased women's earning of cash income/control over economic resources by 249 percent
- Increased women's freedom of movement by 30 percent
- Reduced prevalence of domestic violence by 74 percent

What were the most important lessons learned?

CARE Bangladesh has been using its experience of knowledge management and learning in three primary ways:

1) To build key research questions into programs that will help us not only deliver on impact in that project, but to generate evidence for all of CARE and other development actors to promote the most effective methods
2) Target our programming to replicate lessons learned, like the importance of placing women's empowerment at the heart of food security programs
3) To share evidence in many forums, including peer-reviewed journals such as IDS and advocacy platforms

By identifying best practices and lessons learned, the program hopes to make accumulated knowledge available in order to improve strategies and interventions for food security. The objective of this is to avoid the repetition of mistakes in designing and planning interventions, and to reorganize and improve specific elements of ongoing interventions by using accumulated knowledge.

A recent example of how research questions that are built into the program can influence the development of the program and also the broader international development sector is the June 2015 Impact Study Report: Comparison of PM2A and MCHN Approaches in SHOUHARDO II, which concluded

"Both the MCHN approach targeting PEP and the PM2A approach were very effective in reducing stunting in the Bangladesh context. Greater reductions in stunting, and in wasting among children 6-23 months were achieved in the PM2A villages than in the MCHN villages. This may have been due to the higher participation of non-poor women in the learning sessions and GMP in the PM2A communities."

Is there any other critical information you would like to share?

The collection and sharing of human interest stories is an important element of capturing the tangible impact of key program interventions on beneficiaries in order to inform learning and future program design. The stories are designed to present program beneficiaries, the challenges they face, and their achievements to showcase how, with the support of the program, they are addressing the issues that prohibit them to respond to development opportunities. This is highlighted in the following example.

Sufia (38) lives in Bera in northwest Bangladesh with her family. As a successful homestead gardener, she fulfills her family's nutritional needs and has enough produce left over to distribute to relatives and neighbors and sell to earn additional income. "I always think about how I can develop my economic condition so that we can have three meals a day and good health. Through receiving comprehensive homestead development training, I saw a ray of hope to achieve my dream," Sufia said.

But Sufia did not always believe her dream was achievable. Due to river erosion, her family's homestead and cultivable land was destroyed. Her husband was then injured in a road accident, which also significantly affected their financial situation. Along with her husband and two children, Sufia had no other alternative but to live with her father.

Sufia's situation began to improve when she was selected as a SHOUHARDO II beneficiary. She received three days of comprehensive homestead development training and inputs, including mango, guava, lemon, and neem saplings, different fruit and vegetable seeds, and a goat. Independently, she prepared seed beds, planted tree saplings, sowed seeds, and weeded and irrigated her garden. Her dedication to her work led to a bump in production: She not only increased her family's access to food, but also their dietary diversity.

Sufia is one of many who benefitted from the 79 percent increase in average household monthly income, the 281 percent increase in the number of households growing vegetables, and the 81 percent increase in household dietary diversity in the SHOUHARDO II Program areas.