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TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: ACHIEVING RESULTS THROUGH CAPACITY BUILDING



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TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: ACHIEVING RESULTS THROUGH CAPACITY BUILDING

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Founded in 1945, CARE is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty. Last year CARE worked in 90 countries and reached more than 72 million people around the world.

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I. BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY IS BUILDING CAPACITY

In measuring the effectiveness of capacity building, we often remind ourselves that we can control activities and outputs, and that we can influence the outcomes, but we can only appreciate the results because they are affected by so many factors beyond our control.

Accumulated evidence from development activities in 18 countries shows that transformative learning is critical to achieving and sustaining a broad spectrum of development results.

Chief among these factors is the participant's decision to use what has been learned—and the earlier decision to learn actively in the classes we provide. The output is only influenced by doing the best training we can.

What can we do to support more positive decision-making? One suggestion is 'behavioral economics' but too much of its application is manipulation towards a decision we decide is right for the participant. It is much better to equip a person to make the life choices that break generational poverty, solve daily problems in dysfunctional communities, and improve underdeveloped societies.

Acquiring skills is important, but no one believes that class-time is all it takes to pull yourself out of poverty, start your own business, or improve your child's nutrition and health. Capacity building efforts often come up short because the learning is not put into practice. There are many reasons for this, and most, but crucially not all, are beyond our control.

A recurring characteristic of poor people the world over is a sense of helplessness that can cause a person to think there is no point in taking action to modify behavior. 'Self-efficacy' is the term in adult learning: the belief in one's ability to act so as to achieve desired outcomes—one's ability to cope, adapt, and be successful. Aspirations are critical; it's the goals and a desire to attain them that encourage a person to make the necessary investment of effort needed to improve their lives.



"I never thought that I could contribute to the development of my village being a woman. The women's self-help group training has boosted my confidence and helped me to learn a lot."

— SHOUHARDO II participant Taslima Akhter, Chairperson of her Village Development Committee, receiving the Joyeeta Award, a national award for women who make an extraordinary contribution to development.
© Saifuddin Ahmed/CARE Bangladesh.

2. AGENCY AND SELF-PERCEPTION

Programs often work toward empowerment and gender equity to address agency and self-perception. This work is about changing power relations in the direction of individuals, about individual agency. The idea is to effect a person's ability to see more and different options and to make meaningful choices based on reflection on these options. In the starkest terms, people can become the agents of their own development rather than being objects of someone else's plans. Support for individual agency is a process intended to bring about a profound and lasting change: empowerment is transformation in attitudes, perceptions, and behavior.

Self-efficacy and the capacity to aspire are particularly important in traditional societies where a woman's role is defined by generations. She is the one to get up with the sun to fetch water because, simply, that is what she believes a woman does. Many poor women believe that this contribution is valueless, and then find it difficult to change this belief. By establishing that her work has value, she begins to see that she can change her own outcomes and future.

This leads directly to changes in relationships in the family and community as well as participation in community activities—all of which increase her psychological empowerment and build social capital.

A society's institutions and structures are important in this. Economic institutions and social structures—laws, policies, regulatory frameworks, social solidarity, norms governing people's behavior—determine whether people even have access to assets, if women can venture out of the house on their own, and more. Because a development project cannot deliver every needed support, we try to empower people to adapt and act.

In private enterprise support, for example, there is a high correlation between business success and the ability of entrepreneurs to adapt. "Works by economists Paul Romer, Paul Krugman, Brian Arthur, Annalee Saxenian and others [indicate that] it is ideas that drive companies and economies—Constantly adapting [to] a complex world in constant turmoil which is both unpredictable and uncontrollable—means the temperament of the entrepreneur is one of the major factors in" determining success (Gibbons, 2013).

This is a critical point: it is vitally important to focus on enabling the new entrepreneurs to face the shocks of insecurity and changing markets. And when we do enough of this, the empowered entrepreneurs can lead to the development of demand-driven advisory services—extension, information, investment, and marketing.

But the entrepreneur of necessity, in contrast to an entrepreneur of opportunity, does not naturally have the temperament that allows good risk assessment, trust in one's self to manage that risk, and the ability to be comfortable with the inevitable uncertainty to come. Gaining this ability is not a skill to be taught but rather a temperament to be adopted.



Women respond to a new idea in a women's self help group. © Marium ul Mutahara/CARE Bangladesh.

3. RESULTS

Several projects and programs around the world have built people's capacity through transformative learning successfully.

USAID's SHOUHARDO II, implemented by CARE Bangladesh, delivers a wide range of services, trainings, and interventions from distribution of food rations, cash for work, and infrastructure repair to non-farm income generation, skills training, savings promotion, and training on nutrition and sanitation. It is an extraordinarily broad program, and this comprehensive approach in itself is the chief best practice of the project.

When delivered as an integrated whole, sustained interventions enable the participants, all among the poor and extremely poor of Bangladesh, to internalize new ways of looking at their life circumstances, options, and their ability to influence their future. Decision-making takes on a longer term perspective, and results such as these are more likely to continue after the project ends:

- Increased adoption of improved technologies by field crop producers by 120%
- Increased average household dietary diversity score by 81%
- Reduced stunting in children under five years of age by 21%
- Increased women's earning of cash income/control over economic resources by 248%
- Increased women's freedom of movement by 30%
- Reduced prevalence of domestic violence by 74%

The theory of change in SHOUHARDO II is that the combination of activities is necessary to obtain a sustained impact.

Independently, this was tested in randomized control trials in Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Pakistan, and Peru. The rigorous study of 10,495 participants "found statistically significant impacts on all 10 key outcomes or indices. One year after the end of the intervention, 36 months after the productive asset transfer, 8 out of 10 indices still showed statistically significant gains" (Banjeree, et al., 2015).

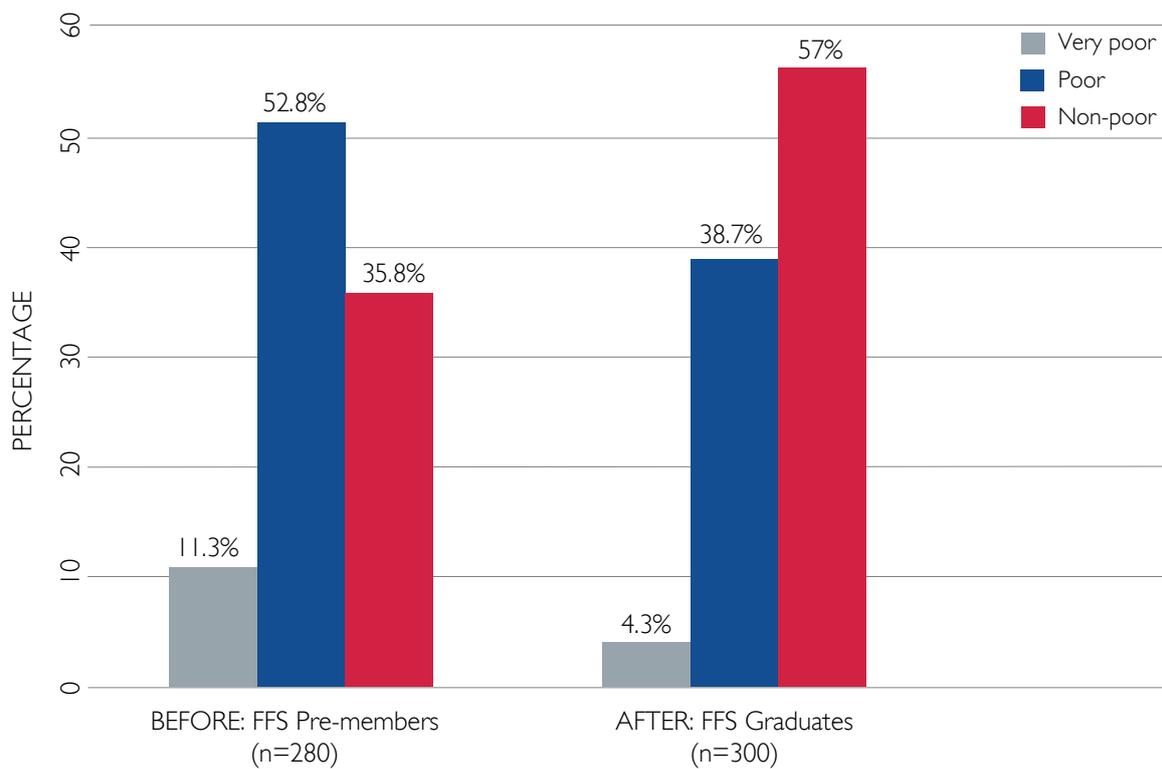
These findings are also consistent with the results of a program delivered by the Non-government Organization, Women for Women International. In eight conflict countries, the program served over 120,000 very poor women over five years. Participants sustained significant gains a year after graduation in income, financial well-being, women's decision-making, and a range of health indicators.



Participants learn about dietary diversity with the introduction of a new variety of papaya sapling by a SHOUHARDO II Community Agriculture Volunteer. © CARE Bangladesh.

Similarly, a recent study of farmer field schools in Kenya found participants “showed significantly higher levels than the control group on all tested items” of a well-being ranking which includes increases in women’s contribution to family income, less criticism from women of “husband’s acceptance of his responsibilities”, higher status in the community for women, and women in leadership roles.

Graduation to higher income groups in the Farmer Field School (FFS) project in Kenya



Source: Duveskog, 2013.

The researchers noted that the program “appears to have led both sexes to question local traditions that dictate what men and women can and cannot do. The direct implications seem most profound for women, as many taboos were restricting women from engaging in commercial agriculture. In general the study found these kinds of gendered restrictions to be much more limiting for agricultural activity in this setting than what is normally assumed, as well as being connected to a high level of superstition and fear. The study thus brings significant new knowledge to the understanding of education processes that are holistic in nature” (Duveskog, 2013).

In India, research shows a strong positive association between examination results and both self-esteem and self-efficacy: “We find a remarkably strong and robust effect of the intervention on both self-esteem and self-efficacy: being in the program raises both by about one standard deviation and the effects of the intervention on life evaluation is about half of a standard deviation” (Krishnan, et al., 2010).

It is important to measure changes in non-cognitive skills and their consequences in an objective way. A team of Danish and Kenyan researchers are analyzing the development process and the application of a comprehensive survey instrument for quantitative measurement of transformative learning. They discuss efforts to develop a survey tool which can identify transformative learning as a distinct form of adult learning, and report on, inter alia, a survey pilot first tested in Tanzania in 2011 and found that “this instrument makes significant headway by quantifying indicators of transformation in non-western settings” with indicators for community response, gender relations, and changes in confidence (Friis-Hansen, 2015).



4. THE MECHANISM

Transformative learning is the “process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—the frames of reference that define their real life world” (Mezirow, 1997). Jack Mezirow, the academic champion of this discipline, calls these ‘habits of the mind’. Development practitioners see these daily as ‘differing cultural perspectives’.

Transformative learning occurs naturally for all of us, with our views shifting over time and the experience of ‘life-changing events’.

Perspectives change and evolve naturally as we experience life. Several studies find that an ordered and structured transformative learning program can guide and speed this evolution and the uptake of more productive economic behavior as the learner makes decisions about shifting his or her view of society and their place in it.

Time is required to help our participants become more aware and more critical of their assumptions, to be better able to recognize frames of reference, and to be more responsible and effective in working with others to solve problems. Over a period of several months—at least six in the foregoing examples—new information is used only as a resource in adult learning. To become meaningful it must be incorporated by the learner into the existing frame of reference through gradual modification and adoption. Trainers deliver new information, and they also help learners transform the frame of reference to fully internalize the learning experience.

The process of developing these non-cognitive skills begins in a “protected space”. In the project environment, participants are able to test new behaviors which step away from traditional norms, “a particularly important aspect in [traditional societies] where norms and culture strongly dictate the space individuals have to act out new ways of doing or being” (Duveskog, 2013).

In farmer field schools, this is often called a ‘safe space’ where experiments with new perspectives and behaviors are built into a “presentation of knowledge, hands-on-activities, collaborative learning, and presentational knowing, **creating opportunities for questioning cultural norms and building social capital**—Interestingly the instrumental learning through technical skill-based activities—where farmers regularly collect data in the field on different crop varieties, growth rates, and insect damage—seemed to create opportunities for members to question cultural norms and deeply held superstitious beliefs and foster a gradual shift from habitual practice to a stronger focus on empiricism. **The opportunity to question norms seemed particularly important for women participants, possibly since many norms reinforce traditional gender roles**” (emphasis added, Duveskog, 2013).

This stands in sharp contrast to most efforts to effect behavior change which usually focus on mass media such as billboards, on messages for 'strategic communication', and on community wide communication such as theater. Some are going further, as in Sustainable Nutrition and Agriculture Promotion (SNAP) in Sierra Leone where mobile phone messaging and community health volunteers similar to those in SHOUHARDO II play an integral role in capacity building.

This is more of an 'opinion leader' approach, and measurable results are hard to determine. Looking at USAID's four country Maternal Neonatal Health Program, for example, an evaluation found that "the evidence in the study suggests that, despite acceptance of communication as a legitimate and appropriate project component, behavior change and behavior change communication have failed to receive attention" in operations (Elmendorf, et al., 2005).

The importance of transformative learning in the training we provide was highlighted in a survey done in Ukraine in the 1990s that showed that the view of business held by small holder farmers might act as a filter through which they might interpret differently or inappropriately information that builds on common business principles. For example, over 47% of the population believes that negotiation does not end when a contract is signed, and another 29% 'aren't sure' it's finished. And this has direct implications on success: if an instructor means 'final agreement', the students will be moving on a different line of reasoning because to them agreement has not yet been reached and as the line of instruction continues, the divergence magnifies, and the conclusion the instructor reaches might seem wholly unsupported in the minds of the students because they don't share the assumption of agreement. The point the teacher is making could be lost entirely (USAID, 1999).



Women receive growth monitoring information to improve their children's nutrition. © Asafuzzaman/CARE Bangladesh.

More broadly, the process of changing the habits of the mind is centered on a critical reflection on our assumptions, interpretations, and beliefs. According to a study in Ethiopia "there is a high correlation of poverty and lower demand for credit for productive purposes among people with low aspirations and low self-efficacy". The same study described a school program in India which showed success in economic outcomes when self esteem and aspirations were raised to draw the conclusion that, low aspirations and a sense of helplessness foster "a self reinforcing cycle of poverty" (Bernard, et al., 2011).

5. IN PRACTICE

Capacity building through transformative learning has been put into practice by development organizations around the world and has particularly succeeded when implemented in a holistic framework.

Women for Women International uses a life skills approach. Working only with women who have been victims of conflict, the program is intentional in its goal of transforming participants from victim to survivor to active citizen. Over a 12 month period, participants engage in facilitated group workshops about women as decision makers, social networks and safety nets, women's health, and earning an income. These life skills workshops are supplemented by business classes, vocational skills training, coaching for group businesses, monthly cash transfers and savings promotion.

Farmer Field Schools, as the name implies, conduct much of their training out of doors. Experiential learning, hands on demonstrations, and modeling new behaviors are key. In forming learning groups, many field schools intentionally shift roles. In the safe spaces the schools create, women are asked to lead groups of farmers as they go through training in new methods, use of fertilizers, and the like throughout a growing season.

SHOUHARDO II uses a 'holistic' framework in which participants have a sustained relationship with the project. There is coaching and training on a number of topics, distribution of food rations, group sessions on a range of nutrition and sanitation issues, and much more. The idea is to provide a 'big push' at a local level over an extended period of time in the hope of unlocking a poverty trap with long-term development objectives integrated into the near-term support activities. It is this long-term contact and the continuous reinforcement of new behaviors that makes the difference. Improved nutrition via increased dietary diversity, improved child health via timely vaccinations, reduced illnesses due to better hygiene practices, adoption of new farming methods—these all represent change in behaviors. As SHOUHARDO II has over 1.8 million beneficiaries, house to house follow up is impossible, so the avenue to sustained results is the adoption of new practices by each individual through transformative learning.



A woman presents during a progress sharing meeting for village development organized by SHOUHARDO II.
© Mariam ul Mutahara/CARE Bangladesh.

6. THE ECONOMICS

A focus on individual agency and behavior beyond income is integral to breaking the cycle of poverty. Capacity building through transformative learning can improve individual decision-making ability and more broadly, effect economic and social change.

People who are born into a cycle of poverty often make choices that contribute to the continuation of that cycle. For example, it might seem obvious that using a new seed variety with a 200% return on investment or a fertilizer which brings a 250% increase in yield is the wise choice, yet these are routinely declined. This behavior may seem economically counter-productive, but in light of contextual factors and influences, it can be understood as rational.

There are many external constraints that can prevent people from making 'better' choices. Another class of factors is involved. For example, one's sense of self, one's class, or role in society might preclude investing in, say, a child's education. One might also have a valid preference for the status quo, be impatient, or overvalue opportunity costs for any number of reasons. By addressing the external constraints that can lead a person to make decisions not to invest in well-being enhancing activities, we can help people see that these investments can transform their lives.

“Decision-making relies on a set of beliefs and perceptions as developed over time regarding both physical and social environment, and poverty may lead individuals to construct mental models that uniquely diminish the significance of some features of the environment and magnify others. If the individual believes that she has little if any ability to impact on her well-being, then she would have inadequate incentives to become informed about or explore pathways into better well-being. Moreover, she would have little motivation to allocate resources to modify her beliefs and perceptions—Thus, while information, credit, insurance, and other resources or opportunities may be available, they remain unexploited by the agent because she is convinced that her actions will not make a difference” (Bernard, 2011).

Economic institutions and social structures are also critical. These formal legal rules and informal social norms govern individual behavior in a society. They are laws and regulations, and customs and traditions—things like trust, the role of women, level of cooperation, views of property, corruption, and so on—and how these 'rules of the game' are enforced.



Members of a women's savings group invest their deposits.
© CARE Bangladesh.

We all act within systems of these institutions, and Douglass North, awarded a Nobel prize in 1993, applied this to development work: “Institutions form the incentive structure of a society and so the political and economic institutions are the underlying determinant of economic performance. Time, as it relates to economic and societal change, is the dimension in which the learning process of human beings shapes the way institutions evolve. That is, the beliefs held by individuals, groups, and societies determine their choices, and these beliefs are a consequence of learning through time—not just the span of an individual’s life or of a generation but the learning embodied in individuals, groups, and societies that is cumulative through time and passed on intergenerationally by the culture of a society” (North, 1994).

This is transformative learning writ large; inter-generational change takes place as agency reaches large numbers of individuals. Research in Bolivia indicates that “extensive market interactions may accustom individuals to the idea that interactions with strangers may be mutually beneficial—By contrast, those who do not customarily deal with strangers in mutually advantageous ways may be more likely to treat anonymous interactions as hostile, threatening, or occasions for opportunistic pursuit of self-interest” (Gurven, et al., 2008).

As in the development projects’ protected spaces, it appears that markets bring strangers into contact on a regular basis, encouraging people to develop more concern for others beyond their family and immediate neighbors. Instead of parochialism, being integrated into markets encourages a spirit of unity and collaboration. If it is the intention of development programs to help societies develop, then help individuals develop and engage in markets in order to build cohesive systems.



A woman implements her new knowledge in crop production. © Asafuzzaman/CARE Bangladesh.

7. PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS

- A good education comprises both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and in poor societies self-esteem and self-efficacy are strongly correlated to positive outcomes.
- Complex behavior is learned gradually, and transformation can only occur over time.
- It is established that a multifaceted approach to increasing income and well-being for the ultra poor is sustainable and cost effective.
- It is crucial to recognize that learning needs must be defined so as to recognize both short-term and long-term goals.

To illustrate, consider a savings promotion activity. To promote saving by participants, project design often ties savings to a tangible outcome such as investment in a productive asset to provide an income generating livelihood. The reasoning is clear: demonstrate the value of saving and start a small business. The development goals, however, are not sewing machines and tillers but rather a functioning small business with decent cash management and thus a prospect for success.

By requiring the purchase of an asset, we immediately undercut the empowerment effort by putting the participant under pressure to adopt or reject certain practices with which he might not be comfortable. When the program's incentives stop, so does the savings behavior. Predetermined outcomes such as this investment contradict empowerment since the opportunities for self-determination among stakeholders are limited from the outset.

It is the same for dietary diversity, hygiene, and the rest. Development work is full of stories of people using increased incomes to buy satellite dishes and chocolate bars instead of productive assets and healthier food. Practitioners are often dismayed by this, but it is simply evidence of people taking control and exercising agency with rational choices which consider a full range of factors.

Findings from evaluations and research show that transformative learning is the key factor in achieving more sustainable development results. By helping people develop the non-cognitive skills to make life choices, we can help them break generational poverty and improve their lives.



Women discuss the progress of their income generating activity, a handloom business. © CARE Bangladesh.

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Additional Information

Project website

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