

Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment

REPORT 4

Summary Report

Nijeder Janyia Nijera (We for Ourselves)

Original report: Nazneen Kanji with Brigitta Bode and Anowarul Haq, September 2006

Information on Nijera

Districts: Rangpur, Gaibanda,
Dinajpur, Lalmonirhat,
Nilphamari, Chittagong

Number of unions: 9

Donors: DFID and CARE USA

Time Frame: 2004-2006

Number of program
participants(coverage):
35,000 people (7,000
households)

Background

The aim of CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII)¹ is to better understand CARE International's contribution to women's empowerment and gender equity. The global research protocol uses a framework based on three interrelated dimensions or faces of empowerment: agency, structure and social relations. Within this broad analytical framework, each participating country office has designed its own Strategic Impact Inquiry taking into account the ways in which gender relations are shaped by local and national contexts. In Bangladesh, the strategic impact inquiry was initiated with a study that looked at the notion of women's empowerment from the perspective of individuals and groups within local society². Following this, detailed impact inquiries were conducted in three CARE projects. This summary captures the main findings, recommendations and implications arising out of the study that focused on a community led approaches pilot, Nijeder Janyia Nijera, being implemented by CARE Bangladesh's Social Development Unit.

Program Description

Objectives

The goal of Nijeder Janyia Nijera ("We for Ourselves", henceforth Nijera) is to promote the self-realization of poor rural women and men, to help them articulate their own vision of development, and to strengthen their capacity to act in pursuit of their self-defined goals. The project aims to increase agency - that is the ability of these individuals to fulfill the goals they identify for themselves - by enhancing their relationships with a variety of actors and improving the responsiveness of the social structures that affect them, thus creating an enabling environment for change.

Through a community-led approach supported by trained facilitators, Nijera aims to:

- work with poor rural women and men, and the communities in which they live, encouraging them to articulate their own experiences of poverty, disempowerment and social exclusion
- help them to build their own analysis of power structures and belief systems through which their present situation is reproduced
- enable them to identify their own agendas for action
- build internal capacity for these agendas to be pursued and for progress to be monitored, providing limited direct and material support where necessary
- help identify ways in which poor people and their allies can negotiate effectively with more powerful local actors in pursuit of their aims
- assist the establishment of linkages to external bodies, agencies and service providers whose cooperation is required for the fulfillment of identified goals
- build leadership skills amongst various groups within local society with an emphasis on the poorest men and women
- assist communities in developing village industries through complementary and supportive activities to build a strong and inter-dependent network of village economies
- build capacity of locally elected bodies to institutionalize the community led approach
- establish collaborative arrangements with other parts of CARE Bangladesh and with other like-minded development agencies to build capacity in areas we cannot deal with by ourselves

1. For details on CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment and the empowerment model used, please see accompanying brief. (Report 1)

2. Kanji, N. with B.Bode and A.Haq "Women's empowerment: perceptions, boundaries and strategies in Jalagari Village, NW Bangladesh", August 2005, Care Bangladesh.

- encourage woman to woman and poor to poor learning as the primary mechanism by which successful initiatives are more broadly disseminated
- carefully document lessons learned and disseminate these within CARE, and other parties and agencies in Bangladesh, and to the wider international development community.

Strategy and Activities

Nijera employs a wide range of strategies in order to achieve these aims. Each strategy is based on the principle of community-led action in which the poor are the principle agents of individual and community development. The key strategies comprising Nijera's community-led approach are outlined below.

Effective Entry Point

In each area in which Nijera operates, an entry point was identified that served to build the basis for a wider development intervention. In most cases, this entry point was a process known as Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS).

CLTS engages the entire community in sanitation work, including the eradication of open defecation and the enhancement of hygienic practices. While CLTS is not the only entry strategy used by Nijera, it exemplifies the qualities of an entry strategy that effectively builds a platform for continued community collaboration on a wider range of issues.

It's effectiveness as an entry point to a wider process of community led development is based on a number of factors. Most importantly, CLTS is widely participatory and facilitates the participation of both women and men in a process that is beneficial to the entire community by drastically reducing the instances of diarrhea and other illnesses. In addition, it provides a visible benefit in a short period of time (generally within 2 months) and is cost effective as it encourages the use of local resources. It is also a class-neutral activity that fosters collaboration across socio-economic classes and generates a collective sense of accomplishment.

Once the entry activity is underway, the facilitators work with men and women to analyze the issues they are facing and prioritize key initiatives that would improve the social and economic conditions of the poorest households; these include income generating activities, individual and collective cultivation of unused spaces, savings groups, roadside plantations and more.

Natural Leaders

Nijera recognizes the socially validated specialized knowledge possessed by members of all classes and genders within each community. Thus, as the CLTS process (or other entry strategy) unfolds, 'natural leaders' emerge from within the community. These leaders come from different socio-economic groups and include both men and women with a range of skills and abilities that allow them to take the lead in subsequent development activities. These existing skills of natural leaders are further developed through a variety of capacity building activities - such as workshops and field activities - to increase the confidence and capability of each individual to mobilize the community and drive initiatives forward.

By increasing the ability of natural leaders to interact with individuals from different economic and religious backgrounds, as well as political leaders and elected representatives, natural leaders are able to channel the enthusiasm of the members of their localities to address a variety of issues. To date, natural leaders have successfully led their communities in activities to address hunger, unequal wages and inadequate infrastructure.

Spatial Strategy

In addition to encouraging learning across socio-economic groups by virtue of the work of natural leaders, Nijera also employs a spatial strategy that leads to learning across communities. Over time, the communities in which Nijera's developmental approach is implemented become centers for expanding networks of initiatives fanning out into surrounding communities.

This phased process of spatial expansion is initially supported by Nijera's facilitators in partnership with natural leaders of the central community. Through cross-community visits and events, the process of collective analysis, planning and action is introduced. As neighboring communities seek to engage in this process, new natural leaders emerge within each community to drive the initiatives forward. Once the community-led developmental process is well established, that community then engages in a cross-learning process with a new 'generation' of neighboring communities. This cascading effect spreads the approach throughout clusters of communities and encourages solidarity and continued cooperation between neighboring localities.

Context

Context has a significant impact on every development initiative, and Nijera carefully considers the contexts in which it operates in order to ensure that activities undertaken are suited to their environment. For this reason, the communities where Nijera operates are engaged in different activities that reflect distinct differences in, for example, agro-ecology, historical developments (including land tenure systems and subsequent power dynamics) and distance to markets.

For every community, however, there are a number of common contextual factors to be taken into consideration, including numerous social, economic and political structures and practices that, at a community level, have a significant impact on development initiatives.

The economic arrangement of many communities sees land, which is often the basis for political as well as economic power, being controlled by a small elite. Share cropping and hiring of labor is often widespread and patron-client relationships are pervasive. For the poorest, this lack of economic independence can lead to dependence on usurious money lending and trade in agricultural commodities. Diverse natural conditions, such as flood and drought, also affect economic activity differently across communities.

Social structures and practices, which are often subtle and complex, have an important impact on the engagement of the poor and of women in the development process. For women, their capacity to apply knowledge and influence decision-making is greatly affected by their family circumstances, with new young brides having the least scope to actively shape household activities. Family honor and social standing is closely tied to women's purdah and drastically impacts their mobility, which in turn limits their ability to engage in individual or collective development activities. Domestic violence and public harassment are widespread and women generally lack voice and respect for their views, factors which they emphasize as central to their empowerment.

While a community's political environment is perhaps one of the most influential factors on the development process, it is also one of the most complex and difficult to address. Electoral politics interact with local forms of justice, and the distribution of state-funded entitlements. Structures and processes are plagued with widespread corruption, including the practices of buying votes and selling judgments in cases of arbitration.

Taking these diverse factors into account, Nijera's work has focused on communities with a high proportion of poor people, an absence of powerful figures dominating the local political landscape, and a low level of patron-client relations, where a greater amount of space existed for poorer people in general and women in particular to interact and provide mutual support.



Methods

Two clusters were selected for the SII: Jalagari (where the initial exploratory research³ on women's empowerment had taken place) and Mankira. The two sites selected represented some of the diversity of Nijera clusters: differences in agro-ecology and land distribution to get a variation in the activities being developed (While Jalagari is flood prone, Mankira is drought prone). Jalagari is poorer but there are less inequalities in land holdings than in Mankira, where there are more day laborers. While the population of Jalagari is predominantly Muslim, Mankira is predominantly Hindu. In each site, the main *para*⁴, where Nijera activities had begun, was selected as well as one of the extension *paras*. The extension *paras* were selected from the first round of spread from the main *para* (first generation spread). It was important to select an extension *para* because the Social Development Unit is keen to analyze the spread process, which is key to achieving a greater scale of impacts in Nijera, as well as providing insights for future programs. Since the project has not been running for a long time, it was better to select a first generation *para* to assess impact. Nijera is now active in 14 *paras* in Jalagari and 18 *paras* in Mankira.

A two-day workshop with the full team was held to discuss the sites, the project and the objectives of, and questions for the Strategic Impact Inquiry, as well as to develop the specific methods and tools to be used. Nineteen focus group discussions were held, with groups of natural leaders and interest groups, and the elected members monitoring group. Most included an impact scoring exercise or a Venn-diagram-inspired discussion of institutional change. Five participation stories were documented of natural leaders and four of other women whom CARE staff considered had been particularly empowered by Nijera. A total of 38 interviews were carried out: 27 with *para* residents who were not natural leaders nor involved in Nijera committees and interest groups; and the rest with elected officials, NGOs and selected elite members, including landlords. Finally, two local markets were visited/observed. More details on SII methods are available in a Summary Report on the methods used.

Impact Findings

This strategic impact inquiry revealed with little doubt that Nijera has, within a short period of time, contributed significantly to women's empowerment in the locations in which it operates. Nijera's approach to development, inspired by the Freirian concept of 'conscientization', was successful in initiating personal and collective transformations that resulted in increased women's agency, improved relations between women and men of various classes, and an enhanced structural responsiveness to the pursuit of women's goals.

Agency and Relations

In terms of agency and relations, empowerment was evident in a range of dimensions ranging from educational attainment, to material well being, to bodily health. Underlying all of these changes is a greater sense of self-esteem and an increased consciousness that have given women the courage to pursue development objectives through a variety of activities.

3. Before conducting the Strategic Impact Inquiry of individual projects, original exploratory research was conducted on women's empowerment to analyze gender and power dynamics in one setting in north-western Bangladesh (Jalagari), and to test methods which were appropriate in the Bangladesh context and that allowed women to express themselves in relation to sensitive and personal issues. It also explored women's aspirations around empowerment, how they differed in relation to class and generation, and the way in which they might differ from some of the globally used dimensions, as well as those discussed in feminist literature (bearing in mind there are different strands of feminism)

4. *Para* usually refers to a neighborhood or immediate community. A village can have more than one *para*.

A number of significant changes in women's empowerment should be highlighted. Most importantly, Nijera has helped increase women's mobility, which has a significant impact on their ability to engage in development activities, including those which take place outside of their community. An increase in solidarity within the community has led to greater collective action, in which women have not only been involved but have often taken the lead. Thanks to community-led initiatives to negotiate equal wages for women, the ability of women in some communities to contribute to household income has also improved; as a result women experience greater voice and influence within households.

Structure

It must be noted that, ultimately, those dimensions of empowerment that have undergone the greatest change are within the realm of agency and relationships. However, while fewer advancements have been seen in terms of social structures, significant changes have taken place.

Increased legal awareness and an enhanced understanding of their rights have helped women access more services, such as health care, both collectively and individually from both public and private service providers. Women are participating more in political and judicial structures (e.g. *shalish*), although rampant corruption and perverse power dynamics have made it difficult for women to have much influence in these spheres. Women have also had difficulty penetrating markets, where, despite an increase in mobility to visit markets, the active participation of women is greatly discouraged. Within household structures, however, women have experienced numerous positive changes, including the ability to spend money on personal needs and the increased involvement of men in household activities.

Nijera's Role in Women's Empowerment

Largely, Nijera's role in empowering women relies on its unique strategies, as well as specific techniques employed by trained facilitators to ensure female participation in all initiatives. Of the broad strategies adopted by the Nijera Program, the use of CLTS as an entry point and building a cadre of natural leaders both had a significant impact on women's empowerment.

Through CLTS, not only were women able to participate in the development process from the very beginning, but they were accredited with achieving what is considered as a significant 'public good'. CLTS also served as an inroad to increased mobility by having women engaged in work outside of their homes, and presented opportunities for collaboration between women and men of different classes.

The support of natural leaders, more than 50% of whom are women, placed women at the forefront of subsequent development activities. Their confidence and skills are being built and they earn respect by sharing their knowledge with men and women of different socio-economic standing.

Although the strategies of Nijera are well suited to the promotion of women's empowerment, it is important to recognize the role of context in the success of any initiative on women's empowerment. The influence of social, economic and political structures and practices both helped and hindered the advancement of women's agency in the different localities.

Implications

Based on the findings of the strategic impact inquiry, there are a number of important implications to take into account when considering women's empowerment. Some of these related specifically to CARE's Nijera pilot, while others are applicable to a wider audience working to promote women's empowerment.

One of the most important implications for development organizations that promote gender sensitivity through community led approaches is the role of facilitators in Nijera. Since Nijera does not specifically target women, it is vital that appropriate techniques are used to combat resistance, counteract stereotypes and encourage women to come forward and stay forward.

Attention must be paid to the extent to which an organization supports processes like development of natural leaders. It is vital that natural leaders have the support required in order to take development forward within their own community as well as spreading the process of community-led development to other communities. However, organizations must also ensure that the independence of both individuals and communities in this process of development is not undermined.

Finally, careful consideration should be given to work out strategies to move forward with expansion of such process oriented programs. In this respect, the simultaneous goals of sustaining or deepening existing community development and spreading to new localities must be balanced. In doing so, organizations should engage in dialogue and mutual learning with other organizations using similar approaches.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons to take away from the experience of Nijera, is the importance of analyzing and understanding the context of each locality. For a program addressing women's empowerment, it is only with a clear understanding of the social, economic, political and ecological factors at play that effective strategies, such as an appropriate entry point, can be identified.

In terms of strategies, Nijera has demonstrated a number of effective approaches that have had an impact on women's empowerment within the environment in which the project operates. The value of an entry strategy such as CLTS in immediately enhancing women's and men's sense of power to make significant changes within their communities was proven to be indispensable in the subsequent development process that took place under Nijera. In addition, the emphasis on leadership had an important role in promoting the skills and knowledge of women as well as men within the community. Moreover, supporting natural leaders furthered learning between members of different classes and communities, both of which had a positive effect on women's empowerment.

Another key lesson is the importance of community-led initiatives. Although Nijera emphasizes work with the poorest households, it engages a diverse range of actors including elites and elected representatives. Wide community participation with an emphasis on helping the poorest of the poor ensures increased solidarity in the community as well as facilitating further interaction between members of different classes, genders and religions.

Finally, the importance of collective action for women's empowerment clearly emerged from Nijera. It was through collective action, for example, that women were able to negotiate for equal labor wages; by saving 'fistfuls of rice' that allowed them to stop work without going hungry, and by generating support from women in neighboring communities, women laborers in Mankira began a process of wage negotiation that spread across their union.





In Conclusion

Towards the end of 2006, through a series of workshops and meetings, CARE Bangladesh facilitated a synthesis process to review the findings emerging from each of the SII studies, and to explore the implications of these findings for future work to promote women's empowerment. Feedback from project participants present at the SII Synthesis meeting held in Dhaka in September clearly indicated that, while there had been significant impact on the lives of women involved in CARE projects, what was needed was greater impact on institutions such as dowry, early marriage, women's security, women's leadership and cohesiveness of the women's movement. Reflections from synthesis work in Bangladesh and beyond provide some valuable recommendations and make a compelling case for critical programmatic and organizational change in order to achieve the impact we seek on women's empowerment. As women's empowerment is unfolded through a continuous process of reflection on the findings and recommendations emerging from SII studies, CARE Bangladesh gears itself to reshape its change agenda for women's empowerment.



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Reshaping the Change Agenda for Women's Empowerment

At a global synthesis meeting, participants from various SII research sites around the world shared their findings with each other to answer key questions in relation to the implications for CARE:

- What have we learned about **conceptualizing empowerment** and what new learning do we need to generate in the future?
- What **actual impacts** positive, absent, or negative (harms) are we convinced of in the sites where research was conducted?
- What **impact research methods** that we have we learned are most useful? What do we want to do differently in the future?
- What **changes in program practice and design** does our learning call for and how can we ensure they are understood and embedded in the organization?
- What **changes in organizational practices** do our learning calls for and how can we make sure they are understood and embedded into the organization?
- What **lessons/knowledge must be shared**, with which internal and external actors, and what knowledge products and sharing processes are most appropriate?

Reflections on some of these questions are available in the phase-II Global Synthesis Report entitled *The Courage to Change: Confronting the limits and unleashing the potential of CARE's programming for women*. Click on Women's Empowerment at the CARE Bangladesh site www.carebd.org.