



A Social Analysis In Laxmichari Upazila Making Markets Work for Women Project (M²W²)

THE M²W² PROJECT

Helen Keller International (HKI) was one of the first international NGOs to begin working in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, following the 1997 peace accords. In 2009, HKI initiated the Making Markets Work for Women (M²W²) Project, a three-year development project funded by DFID's Challenge Fund¹, focusing specifically on novel approaches to reach the extreme

poor. The project's goal is to economically empower women from 450 households in 30 remote tribal communities of the CHT. The project is agriculture-based, designed to support extreme-poor women farmers to adopt sustainable, market-oriented production practices.

Beneficiaries are trained in sustainable agricultural techniques and post-harvest processing technologies, which aim to improve yields and incomes from

¹ The challenge fund is also referred to as shiree (the Bangla word for steps and an acronym for "Stimulating Household Improvements Resulting in Economic Empowerment") reflecting the aim of providing households ways out of extreme poverty. EEP/shiree provides resources to national and international NGOs working in Bangladesh through two main funds: the Scale Fund and the Innovation Fund. The former provides NGOs opportunities to increase the outreach of existing programs and the latter to design innovative approaches to reducing extreme poverty in urban and rural areas in Bangladesh.

produce. The project's market-oriented approach assists beneficiaries to form Marketing Committees (MCs), provides each group with transportation assets. One woman from each group is trained as a "middlewoman" and is supported to establish linkages with market vendors and to improve their marketing skills and use of market information. Finally, the project works with government and non-governmental organizations to improve household nutrition and access to health services.

The M²W² project is a complex intervention, with a number of innovative components that challenge existing practices related to agriculture, organization of marketing, and the role of women. All of these components represent a significant torque of change on extremely isolated clusters of communities, which have little experience with markets and which are troubled by ongoing political unrest and land issues. The success of the project rests heavily on the motivation and interest of the target populations to work together in groups, their willingness to take risks and try different practices, and on the stabilization of the political situation.

To better understand the dynamics of the target communities and minimize potential friction resulting from the project, HKI conducted a social analysis at the outset of the project. The social analysis focused specifically on the issues that posed the greatest threats to the empowerment of the extreme-poor women, including the insecurity of land tenure, the challenges of group-based decision making, and the potential social backlash from spouses or from community elites.

During the training of the researchers (who were project staff), a series of semi-structured questionnaire guidelines were developed to explore historical land use patterns; social cohesion and social capital resources; and gender issues in the communities.

Fieldwork took place in two villages, Mezer Para and Mongla Para. The data collection tools were focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and an historical timeline to capture the trends in land management. All research exercises followed a semi-structured interview guideline. In cases where men and women would be reluctant to speak together comfortably, community informants were divided by gender into separate

stakeholder groups, to capture voices of different strata of the society, including the extreme-poor jhum cultivators, the educated elites, tribal leaders, and members of existing community development groups.

BACKGROUND OF THE CHT

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of southeastern Bangladesh, which lies along the borders with India and Myanmar, is a culturally complex area that is ethnically, geographically, and politically distinct from the rest of the country. Historically, the CHT was made up of indigenous people living in small villages in predominantly forested highlands. These groups cultivated using jhum, or slash and burn, techniques. Traditionally, jhum cultivators rotated their crops regularly and left the land fallow for three to five years between plantings, giving the land sufficient time to recover its nutrient content before being cultivated again.

In 1971, ethnic Bengalis began settling in the CHT with government support to ease population pressures in mainland Bangladesh. In response, the insurgent indigenous group Shanti Bahini² carried out an armed rebellion throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s, fighting against the Bengali settlement and demanding autonomy for the CHT. Over the decades, state-supported settlement and the associated violence between indigenous and ethnic Bengali residents led to displacement of indigenous people, sharply reducing the amount of land available for indigenous jhum agricultural production. As more Bengali settlers entered the region and the population density rose, jhum cultivators were obliged to shorten the fallow



² The Shanti Bahini party was a political organization, formed in 1973, whose aims were to establish autonomy for the CHT, including a separate assembly of their own and recognition of the tribal authorities and administrations. Having failed to achieve this agenda constitutionally, the party took to armed resistance the mid-1970s until a Peace Accord was signed under the Awami League administration in 1997. The party was officially disbanded in 1999.

cycles and farm the land more intensively, sometimes dropping the fallow cycle entirely. This resulted in soil nutrient depletion, soil erosion, and diminished soil fertility. Jhum cultivators must now rely on chemical fertilizers, although fertilizers are expensive and create a cycle of dependency. Farmers continue to practice jhum cultivation, but it is no longer a sustainable method of food production for the region.

A peace accord was signed in December 1997 between the Awami League administration and the Hill District Councils, the tribal governments. The accord provided for traditional governance, tribal autonomy, the resolution of land disputes and allowed NGOs to begin working in the CHT. However, intermittent violence and unrest have discouraged larger-scale development. The lack of adequate roads and infrastructure has denied many communities access to markets, to government and NGO services for education, health, and skills training, and to opportunities for formal employment. Ethnic Bengalis control many aspects of life in the CHT, and ethnic marginalization has resulted in tribal peoples' lack of access to markets and services and to lower prices for their land and goods. Economic marginalization of the poorest (often landless) people has left segments of the indigenous populations in extreme poverty and effectively landless. They depend entirely on subsistence jhum cultivation on remote hills, or on insecure day-labor jobs for wealthier community members. The extreme poor Jumma people are among the most vulnerable in Bangladesh.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Findings indicate that the community places strong cultural values on communal decision making and



social inclusion. The community exhibited well-entrenched traditions of working together in groups to solve issues in the community. Traditional forms of intra-community support appear to be triggered mainly during times of crisis —domestic problems, land disputes between families or with outsiders— or those motivated by religious devotion, organized under the leadership of the headman or Buddhist monks. Relatively few examples of activities initiated by the community are specifically geared toward community development. Family and kinship networks are an important source of social support. Many households lack access to formal systems of loans or micro-credit, so they rely instead on relatives for loans or other assistance in times of hardship. A central theme across all stakeholder groups (including the extreme poor) was the fundamental role of the tribal leaders (the headman and kariburi) in making community decisions and allocating social and material support to families. Many felt that the general harmony and unity of the community related to the strength of the tribal authority.

“Our community is characterized by a willingness to work together. There is a lot of goodwill amongst us and we have a collective sense of identity. Integral to that identity is the respect for the karibari or headman. We all love and respect him and abide by his decisions.” –Jhum cultivator group

While solidarity and consensus appeared to be common community values, a number of respondents admitted that the poor are likely to be left out of decision-making processes, often because they are working in the fields when the meetings are held. The extreme poor respondents described feeling marginalized and voiceless in their community, even when they did participate in collective processes. While not overtly excluded, the extreme poor said that they feel they lack the material and social resources to participate equally in community processes and events. While they may freely attend community meetings, they felt that nobody listens to what they have to say or cares about their concerns. They have been left out of the development initiatives organized in their communities.

“But we only participate by attending the meetings, no one really listens to what we have to say because no one really cares about our concerns. What is important is what the elders or the headman says because that’s what counts.”

–Extreme poor group.

GENDER ISSUES

Male and female participants acknowledged that women have become more educated, informed, and engaged in their communities in recent years, and they now have more status and respect in their communities than in the past. This is largely due to the influence of development programs, which have deliberately promoted women's involvement. Nonetheless, women's participation remains limited to a few key areas, and they remain isolated from critical areas, such as land ownership, conflict resolution, and the communal justice system. Women are not permitted to participate in the formal justice system and are subject to domestic violence, an issue that is considered "domestic" and only rarely addressed by tribal leaders.

"In the past, we were not assertive at all and only listened to all the advice given to us. Now we have become more aware of our rights. Aside from a savings committee, we also have the [development committee] which gives us more of a say over community development matters. We interact freely with everyone and no one has more importance than the other. Previously we wouldn't have the courage to speak so freely in front of men but now we have no such problems."

–Elite woman, Development Committee member.

Overall, the position and influence of elite women in the communities seems to be improving in many contexts. However, women of the extreme poor do not seem to be included in this broader social change. Extreme-poor women repeatedly mentioned that alcohol use and gambling, related to male joblessness, have increased significantly, affecting women's physical and economic security. They were irate at the wage disparities for day labor, as women consistently are paid less than men for the same work. They also mentioned that while they would like to participate in decision-making in their community, the men exclude them, and they felt they lack the knowledge and education to contribute to the process.



"The [men] don't care about our problems. Even if we work too much, our husbands also yell at us! They say, if you keep working so much, you will die. But the kids don't go to the fathers when they need food, they come to us. We're always worried about this." –Extreme-poor women

LAND LOSS AND LAND CONFLICT

Discussions related to land management described a seismic and violent shift in land ownership and land use systems since 1971. Jhum lands traditionally were not registered to an individual owner, but instead were considered communal property. Land was plentiful, and ownership was secured through consistent use by one family. There was no need to ask the headman's permission to use land at that time, although the headman would resolve any conflicting claims between families. Respondents explained the fallow cycle at that time followed a four-to-five-year rotation period, and the land was fertile, requiring limited effort and inputs to generate a good harvest.

"There is a social belief that if we verbally state 'This part is going to be mine,' no one will dispute that. Once a family has cultivated one piece, it is recognized as theirs."

–Jhum cultivator group

Starting in 1971, indigenous communities in both paras began losing access to land—registered and unregistered—due to the army-backed settlements. Each settler family was officially allocated five acres of land, but respondents claimed that the settlers seized additional lands or obtained them through deceptive lease agreements. A period of violence over land in the 1980's forced many indigenous families to flee. While most have returned to the communities, the respondents indicated that seven of the ten parts of original lands were now lost; the remaining three parts that are claimed by the indigenous people include both registered and unregistered plots. Community members' attempts to register those remaining lands and to prevent further loss of land are fraught by deceptive and overt administrative discriminations.

The availability of open, communal property for traditional jhum cultivation has decreased dramatically, and much of the jhum cultivation is now done through leasing arrangements with Bengali and indigenous landowners. Leasing land for jhum cultivation is the only option for the poorest of the poor. However, the extreme-poor cultivators described the nature of land

leasing arrangements to be exploitative, putting the most vulnerable community members in a vicious cycle of livelihood insecurity.

CHANGING AGRICULTURE PRACTICES

In contrast to some depictions of jhum cultivators as backwards and tradition bound, traditional cultivation practices have been in flux, adapting to or at least trying new opportunities and technologies. The jhum cultivators were able to describe in great detail the changing varieties of seeds and inputs used over the decades. Paddy was always considered the staple jhum crop, raised in both lowlands and highlands. Seed quality of rice improved over time, with the improved varieties of rice (such as IRRI) introduced by the government research centers. The highland jhum varieties changed and diversified over time. Many jhum cultivators noted that the influx of new settlers created new markets and demand for new varieties, many of which reap high cash value. The jhum practitioners also praised the fact that cash crop production requires minimal changes in technology.

The jhum cultivators' principle complaint was the amount of capital required to lease land at the start of each season. Having no access to formal loans, they are required to borrow from family members to lease land for the growing season. During the rainy period, they seek day labor opportunities, which tend to be insecure, or they engage in activities such as collecting and selling firewood. The poorest of the poor, however, do not even have access to land for this type of livelihood activity.

Most stakeholder groups were pessimistic about the future of jhum as a livelihood although the communities highly value jhum cultivation as a way of life and as a part of their cultural heritage. Jhum cultivation as a livelihood, however, has become synonymous with



extreme poverty. Many households have given up jhum cultivation entirely and have switched to other forms of agriculture or to working as day laborers in paddy fields. In other cases, jhum cultivators looking for available land must travel deep into the forests.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROJECT

The value of a baseline social analysis lies in its ability to identify factors that will facilitate or hinder the success of the project. These include the communities' values and beliefs, their receptivity to new ideas and technologies, and their willingness to support the economic empowerment of a subgroup of the community.

The M²W² project targets the extreme poor as its direct beneficiaries, but other members of the community are indirect beneficiaries. Discussions with community suggest that there is a strong tradition and firm belief in social solidarity and collective decision-making, yet the extreme poor have indeed been marginalized from many community processes. Directly empowering the extreme poor may unleash a potential backlash from some of the more elite groups in the communities. Given the vital role of and universal respect for the traditional leaders, the success of the M²W² project may depend largely on the way it engages community leaders to understand the aims and understand the broader benefits to the community.

In terms of the M²W² project's proposed agriculture and marketing changes, it is clear that land disputes and land loss will remain critical constraint during and beyond the project, and this issue must be addressed. However, the attitudes of jhum cultivators suggest that they will be receptive to new production techniques, including fixed-plot or contour farming, composting, and post-harvest processing, as many people seem to be actively seeking any new livelihood option that would allow them to maintain their agricultural way of life while also increasing their income. Marketing committees may find local supporters and can play an important role in bringing about the type of community-wide change of practice that is required for long-term results.

Most community members' report that women's visibility and participation in community life has increased over the years and that they are accorded

more respect. However, extreme-poor women remain excluded from many aspects of community life because of economic marginalization and skills poverty. The project directly aims to change this dynamic, through skills training and decision-making experience.

The M²W² project has the potential to make a significant impact on the lives of extreme-poor women in the CHT. By aligning itself with existing community values –particularly people’s desire to preserve their agricultural heritage and tradition of social cohesion while expanding their livelihood options– the project can maximize its potential for effectiveness. It will offer women an opportunity to generate income, support their families, and increase their level of respect in the community, all while remaining within culturally appropriate gender roles.



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