



# The contribution of the Chars Livelihoods Programme and the Vulnerable Group Development programme to social inclusion in Bangladesh

## Country Briefing

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### Key messages

- The Chars Livelihoods Programme and the Vulnerable Group Development programme can address some of the immediate outcomes of social exclusion and poverty, particularly by strengthening livelihood opportunities, improving food security, and strengthening social participation.
- But limitations to the impact of these programmes on tackling the structural causes of exclusion and poverty are evident.
- To strengthen the contribution of social safety nets to social inclusion, design and implementation needs to be context-specific and, where appropriate, address the drivers of exclusion. This may include overcoming barriers to accessing and owning productive assets, and providing opportunities for increasing skills and knowledge and strengthening social networks.
- Social safety nets are not a panacea for social inclusion – they need to be part of a broader set of inclusive policies, linked to a range of services and programmes to reduce the multiple dimensions of social exclusion and poverty, and include mechanisms to strengthen the local governance environment.



Increased attention has recently been given to the role that social protection programmes can play beyond the economic sphere, highlighting the importance of understanding and tackling the multidimensional nature of poverty. This research used a social exclusion lens to analyse the effects of two programmes in Bangladesh – the Chars Livelihoods Programme in the *chars*, and the Vulnerable Group Development programme in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Social exclusion refers to the exclusion or marginalisation of groups or individuals from aspects of society based on their identity, including their gender, caste, ethnicity, and religion. Social exclusion does not necessarily equate to poverty, but there is often a strong correlation between socially excluded groups and high levels of poverty. This is the case in Bangladesh, where the indigenous population, people living in remote geographical areas, and women in particular experience social exclusion on the basis of their identity or location, resulting in fewer economic prospects and higher levels of poverty (GSDRC, 2008; Sen and Hulme, 2004; World Bank, 2013).

Social safety nets are well-established poverty reduction tools in Bangladesh, and attention has turned recently to their role in addressing gender and social inclusion aspects of development (GoB, 2013). The aim of this study was to examine the ways in which social safety nets in Bangladesh can contribute to social inclusion, drawing on two case studies with distinct approaches which target poor and socially excluded households: the Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) targeting women in the geographically remote *char* areas; and the Income Generating Vulnerable Group Development (IGVGD) programme targeting ethnic minority women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (see Figure 1).

In the riverine islands of the *chars* in the north-west of Bangladesh, geographic isolation restricts household economic and social engagement with mainland Bangladesh. The area has been largely excluded from development interventions and investment despite the need to tackle high extreme poverty rates, food insecurity, and vulnerability to

river erosion and shocks, including flooding and predictable seasonal poverty and hunger known as *monga*.

**Figure 1: The *chars* and CHT**



The Chittagong Hill Tracts in the south-east of the country have been highly affected by conflict and unrest over the last few decades, and it is where most of Bangladesh's indigenous population is concentrated. CHT has high rates of poverty and food insecurity: the indigenous population face exclusion from economic and social opportunities which are dominated by Bengali settlers to the area.

In both areas, poor men and women rely on daily wage labour in agriculture or domestic work. Women receive lower wages than men and have fewer livelihood options, as sociocultural norms and mobility constraints restrict their opportunities to migrate and access land or other productive assets and markets.

In a context of weak institutions and governance, the provision of state services is poor in both areas. Households in the *chars* have limited communication channels and economic opportunities linking them to the mainland. In CHT, differences in ethnicity, language and culture are key contributing factors to economic and social inequalities. Poor women have very few opportunities to participate actively or voice their

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opinions in community forums or to access mechanisms to hold the government to account in either formal or informal institutions.

## Research objectives and methodology

This research study examined the impacts of CLP and VGD on four dimensions of social exclusion: (1) livelihood and economic opportunities; (2) food security; (3) participation in the community and perceptions of social relations; and (4) state–society relations (see Box 1 for programme details).

### Box 1: CLP and VGD programme details

The Chars Livelihood Programme (CLP) provides assets (usually livestock to the value of 16,000 Taka or approximately \$180) targeted at poor women. Households are further supported with a range of complementary interventions, including support to reduce environmental and economic risk, access to clean water and sanitary latrines, social safety nets during *monga*; help establishing small businesses and creating markets; access to a village savings and loans groups; free health care during programme participation; and group learning on economic activities, social and wellbeing issues (CLP, 2011).

The Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) is a national programme providing food support and training targeted at poor women. Beneficiaries of the Income Generating VGD receive a package over 24 months which includes a monthly food ration, training programmes on income generating and social issues, enrolment in personal savings programmes and access to micro-credit (WFP, 2006).

The objective of the research was not only to assess the impacts of the programmes on their direct objectives, but to examine their effectiveness in promoting more transformative outcomes related to aspects of social inclusion. The research was guided by the social exclusion analytical framework, which emphasises the importance of assessing impacts of interventions on multiple dimensions of poverty and the extent they tackle drivers of social exclusion and poverty (Babajanian and Hagen-Zanker, 2012). In assessing the effects of CLP and VGD, the study generated evidence on the context-related

economic, social and institutional factors that mediated their impact.

The study used a mixed methods research approach including a quasi-experimental impact evaluation (propensity score matching). The CLP research was conducted in two districts in the *chars* area – Gaibandha and Kurigram – with beneficiaries from two CLP cohorts from 2007 and 2009. The VGD research was conducted in two districts in the CHT area – Bandarban and Rangamati – with beneficiaries from 2011 and 2012. The quantitative study consisted of 1,200 households in total for the CLP case study (600 beneficiary households and 600 non-beneficiary households); and 800 households in total for the VGD case study (400 beneficiary households and 400 non-beneficiary households). Qualitative interviews (focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and key informant interviews) were also carried out. Because both interventions targeted women, with the exception of KIIs all the programme beneficiary and non-beneficiary respondents in the research sample were women.

## Research findings

### Livelihood and economic opportunities

The integrated approach of CLP combines the transfer of physical assets and income with strengthening women’s knowledge and social networks. This design has enabled a positive impact on livelihood diversification for women and their households. CLP beneficiary households have a more diversified livelihood portfolio, with more income sources, than non-beneficiaries. The programme also has a positive impact on beneficiary households’ ability to earn an income through agriculture-related activities: in particular from animals and related products and as a result of investing in agricultural inputs and increased access to cultivated land. Moreover, in some cases, women indicate that CLP has resulted in a shift in the casual and unreliable livelihood activities that they and their families undertake. Women reported gaining skills for developing longer-term livelihood opportunities and reducing their dependence on daily wage labour.

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In the case of the VGD programme in CHT, the research findings suggest that women beneficiaries and their households are benefiting economically, particularly from income from cash crops and non-agricultural sources. However, the qualitative findings indicate the programme benefits may not be sustainable given that many beneficiaries report selling their rice and/or investing it in income-generating activities, such as wine making, or as feed for small livestock and poultry. Moreover, the economic training component was reported by a number of women to be insufficient and inappropriate to women's livelihood opportunities in the area, failing to address the key constraints women face such as access to land.

### **Food security**

Both CLP and VGD have helped to improve food security for excluded households as measured by a number of indicators. Importantly, CLP beneficiaries note that knowledge gained in terms of food nutrition and coping with seasonal crises, as well as opportunities created in homestead gardening, have had an important and perceived longer-term effect on food consumption and diversification. For VGD beneficiaries, the effects are more indirect, even though the programme directly transfers food. Beneficiary households are more likely to report that they have enough to eat and the qualitative research shows women are able to eat more nutritious food and more regularly while participating in the programme. However, many women report that this is achieved by selling some of the rice provided and buying more locally appropriate rice or other food, or investing the small amount in their income-generating activities. This suggests it is unlikely that the food security gains will be sustainable after the programme ends.

### **Participation in social events and social networks**

Looking into the broader and more indirect outcomes of the programmes on socially excluded households, the research finds that both programmes strengthen social networks and support women's greater participation in social events – an important finding given the sociocultural mobility constraints and limited opportunities for interaction beyond the

household that women in both areas face. For instance, participation in CLP and VGD strengthens women's participation in community activities: women feel they have increased capacity to join in family celebrations, go on social visits and attend community-wide traditional or ceremonial events and religious celebrations. The majority of participant households said financial capacity, ability to give gifts, mix with educated people and better clothing were the main reasons for their improved ability in this regard.

Not all the findings are positive, however: our research from CLP also indicates that programme participation may increase perceived conflict over land and resources, which may be a result of underlying social inequalities and high pressure on limited resources in the community.

There are also perceived changes in terms of women's social interactions as a result of participation in CLP and VGD. Women report increased confidence in interacting with community members within their own social groups and local government officials. The qualitative research revealed that this was partly to do with their increased economic and income-generating activities as well as connections to programme officials as a result of training. In both programmes, women meet with service providers, local officials or NGOs to receive transfers or receive training.

### **State-society relations and decision-making**

Our findings do not show that either of the programmes facilitates any significant changes in relation to women's exclusion from local community decision-making forums or their ability to hold the local government to account.

There is also a generally poor perception of the local government among beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries alike (as a result of, for example, perceived corruption, and lack of commitment to resolving poverty issues in the area). However, VGD beneficiaries are slightly more likely than non-beneficiaries to voice their opinions to local leaders about service delivery or to appeal to the local government to solve a problem. CLP beneficiaries, however, are less likely to voice their opinions or

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appeal to the local government in the *chars* than non-beneficiaries. CLP respondents reported not having the confidence to ask for help: they feel that, as CLP participants are seen as being supported by NGOs, they will be ignored in relation to any other social support available from the local government and that officials do not accept their views.

At the central level we find that beneficiaries have more positive perceptions of the central government than non-beneficiaries in both programmes. Although CLP is funded by an international donor and implemented through NGOs, this seems to suggest that receiving social protection, no matter who provides it, contributes to a more positive attitude among poor citizens towards central government.

### Policy implications

This research has demonstrated that social safety nets such as CLP and VGD can go some way to addressing the immediate outcomes of social exclusion and poverty by strengthening livelihood opportunities, improving food security, and strengthening social participation. The research also shows that, if appropriately designed and implemented, social safety nets can also address some of the structural drivers of social exclusion, for example by overcoming barriers to accessing and owning productive assets, providing opportunities for increasing skills and knowledge, and strengthening social networks. However, the findings also demonstrate that there are limitations to the role safety nets play in addressing the structural causes of exclusion and poverty. Tackling embedded sociocultural norms that drive inequality and exclusion, or creating opportunities for enhancing citizen voice and accountability, for example, are approaches that remain weakly integrated into safety net policies and programmes.

Maximising the potential impacts of social safety nets to address dimensions of social exclusion and the implications for longer-term poverty reduction requires greater attention to the following policy implications: ensuring that safety net programmes are appropriately designed and implemented to meet context-specific needs; creating linkages to services

and programmes to reduce the multiple dimensions of social exclusion and poverty; strengthening the capacity of government agencies to deliver safety net programmes; and integrating regular monitoring and evaluation to capture the direct effects of the programme but also to monitor and evaluate its indirect or unintentional effects.

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This country briefing is part of a wider research project that assessed the effectiveness and relevance of social protection and labour programmes in promoting social inclusion in South Asia. The research was undertaken in collaboration with partner organisations in four countries, examining BRAC's life skills education and livelihoods trainings for young women in Afghanistan, the Chars Livelihoods Programme and the Vulnerable Group Development Programme in Bangladesh, India's National Health Insurance Programme (RSBY) in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, and the Child Grant in the Karnali region of Nepal. Reports and briefings for each country and a paper providing cross-country analysis and drawing out lessons of relevance for regional and international policy can be found at: [www.odi.org/sp-inclusion](http://www.odi.org/sp-inclusion).

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