

# ‘Strong nets catch fish’: promoting pro-poor partnerships in Bangladesh

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*This article describes the experiences of a small Bangladeshi NGO in using actor-oriented tools to focus on key people and partnerships in project planning, monitoring, and evaluation. The approach has helped to identify interventions that are context-specific, building on key local actors and indigenous networks, and sensitive to the constraints experienced by the poorest. As a result, the NGO has moved away from an externally driven agenda, to become a more thoughtful and responsive organisation. In developing the approach, the NGO encountered some problems due to the political sensitivity concerning the representation of linkages. This underlines the importance of using these tools in a politically aware, positive, and reflective way.*

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## Introduction: lines to nets?

In the late 1990s a small NGO, Development Wheel (DEW), began working in the *chars* of Jamalpur in Bangladesh. *Chars* are islands that form in the country’s river deltas. The rivers change their course every year, lifting and depositing soil as they move. So *chars* are constantly eroding away and reforming in new locations. *Char*-dwellers are among the most vulnerable people in Bangladesh. The temporary nature and isolation of the *chars* mean that local people have little infrastructure and less access to services than do mainlanders.

DEW’s work has involved forming groups and providing them with small loans and training in agriculture and sanitation. When heavy floods occur, DEW acts as an intermediary in supplying emergency relief. As with most small NGOs in Bangladesh, its work has been very much externally driven, with DEW acting as an implementer for various large donor or government initiatives (for example, providing training for the World Food Programme and the government’s Women Affairs Directorate). Although small NGOs do play an important part in delivering donor and national programmes to the grassroots level, this role does not extend to bringing issues from the grassroots back to the national forum. There is little grassroots-based planning, and client groups tend to be seen as, and to act

as, passive recipients of government and donor aid. With control and funds coming from the centre (NGOs in Bangladesh rely largely on foreign donor or government funds), the NGO sector is characterised by 'vertical links' ('lines'), from donors and government offices to NGOs, rather than horizontal links ('nets') between potential local partners.

In 2002, DEW became involved in a research project funded by the Crops Post Harvest Programme (CPHP) of the Department for International Development (DFID), the development arm of the UK government. CPHP's interest was in 'innovation systems': the network of actors and institutions involved in the generation and use of new knowledge, and in promoting pro-poor development by strengthening the participation of resource-poor farmers in these systems. The rationale of this 'actor-oriented' approach is that if such farmers are better linked into innovation systems, they will be able to take advantage of new technologies and marketing opportunities. The innovation system as a whole will also benefit from farmers' knowledge and experience.

With CPHP's support, DEW and three other coalition partners (two researchers and a business-development NGO) decided to use an actor-oriented approach to understand key innovation systems in which *char*-dwellers are involved, and to develop action plans to strengthen their links to these systems. DEW's aims were to develop context-specific planning; to identify the right partners to make innovation systems work for *char*-dwellers, particularly the poorest; and to build partnerships for action.

## Developing an actor-oriented approach: how are nets built here?

DEW and its research coalition used a number of actor-oriented planning and monitoring tools to study the networks involved in *char*-based innovation systems. These tools are described in detail elsewhere (Biggs and Matsuert 2004; Matsuert *et al.* 2005). They included timelines (focused on the key actors involved in initiating change), actor-linkage mapping exercises, actor-linkage matrices (to quantify and monitor changes in links), and 'determinants diagrams', which look closely at the nature of links.

For two key *char*-based enterprises (chilli and beef production), we monitored 40 households over a year to look at what links they used to gain access to information, services, and markets. We used a wealth-ranking exercise to disaggregate households and selected a sample from each resource group. We also monitored key actors in the innovation systems at the local, regional, and national levels and looked at how they link with each other and with *char*-dwellers. This monitoring was carried out alongside a more conventional analysis of technical and marketing opportunities and constraints in chilli and beef production.

The next step was to organise focus-group discussions with key actors. We used these to look more closely at the nature of the links that appeared particularly critical to chilli and beef innovation systems. One example is the key role of local fertiliser retailers as a bridge between national innovators (research and private sector) and *char*-dwellers. We looked both at effective links, such as this, and at non-functioning or problematic links. Using determinants diagrams, we analysed the strengths and weaknesses of key links and generated ideas to improve them. We held separate meetings with farmers of differing wealth groups and with men and women.

We reported findings from group discussions at an open meeting to which all key actors were invited. We also used this meeting to request assistance in taking plans forward. There was a lot of interest and excitement, with NGOs, farmers, and agricultural extension staff offering to work together to take this process further.

## Building networks: using local materials

As we identified key actors in the innovation systems, the team tried to involve them in the research and action-planning process. We wanted to work with these actors from an early stage, both to benefit from their knowledge and experience of the sector, and to build partnerships to act on our findings.

Key actors such as Government Agricultural Research and Extension staff were obvious from the start. They are part of the 'formal' innovation system. The importance of others, such as neighbours, market retailers, private veterinary surgeons, and indigenous healers, emerged as we saw whom the case-study households were actually interacting with. We invited all these actors to participate in our research activities, through visiting them regularly (as part of case-study monitoring), and inviting them to join us on the *chars* for informal visits and meetings.

## Outcomes: what did we catch?

### *Context-specific planning*

Using the innovation systems approach and actor-oriented tools, DEW and its partners made action plans which are specific to the *chars* and could not have been identified in a centralised, national plan. For example, the indigenous healers who visit the *chars* every year, and could potentially deliver important information and services, are not known to the national livestock research department. DEW would like to support these healers to improve the quality of their work in the *chars*.

DEW has used the approach to try to move away from an external and donor-driven agenda to one that is based on grassroots realities and builds on existing strengths.

### *A better understanding of the effect of poverty and gender on linkages*

By mapping and discussing links separately with different resource groups (and with men and women), DEW has developed an understanding of particular difficulties which the poorest, and women, face in making effective linkages. For example, due to cash-flow problems, resource-poor households tend to sell their chilli green rather than red. Unlike red chilli, green chilli cannot be stored and so must be sold quickly after harvest. These farmers have little bargaining power and tend to receive low prices from the middlemen, while richer farmers have more cordial relations and strike good deals with them.

Due to social restrictions, women have almost no links outside the *char*. Although women are often in charge of the household, while the men migrate for work, it is not acceptable for them to make contact with key information providers or service providers such as the veterinary surgeon or market retailers, because those are men from outside their own household sphere. Because they provide loans, it has become acceptable for women to meet with NGOs, so these are a key source of help and information as well as providing a legitimate forum for women to meet and discuss important issues. Another functioning link is with indigenous healers who have long-standing relations with *char*-dwellers and stay in local households when they visit, and so are not classed as 'unknown men'.

### *Finding the right partners*

'Formal' links (agricultural extension workers going to the farmers, for example) are under-represented in the *chars* because of their isolation and lack of infrastructure. This exercise

helped DEW to identify alternative, 'informal' links, such as those described above, which are effective in helping *char*-dwellers to innovate and develop their enterprises.

Through the research, DEW made some important new partners. DEW staff met for the first time with local shopkeepers, indigenous healers, private-sector manufacturers and processors, local NGOs, and many others. They found that these actors were interested and keen to get involved in their work. Working with them creates new opportunities and harnesses resources that could provide an alternative to centralised donor or government funding.

### *Action orientation*

Identifying key actors and building relationships early has helped some ideas to move smoothly into implementation, without being formally planned or funded. For example, as a result of coming to the *chars*, national researchers provided new seed varieties to *char*-based farmers; soil researchers have provided soil-sampling services; a private-sector seed supplier has offered to provide training courses; and a chilli-processing firm sent staff to investigate purchasing from this area.

## Problems encountered: tangled threads

### *Representing linkages can be political*

A problem encountered in our research was that in some cases our findings on links did not fit with the officially accepted understanding of how things work. For example, our observation that agricultural extension workers are rarely seen on the *chars* contradicted the Extension Department's self-image as one that reaches every corner of the country and plays a key bridging role in agricultural innovation systems. Presenting information that contradicts an organisation's self-image, particularly when, as in this case, it is presented by a small NGO to a large and powerful organisation, is very problematic. Our findings were met with hostility and almost cost us our relationship with this important actor.

As the research project progressed, we found it helpful to move away from critical and judgemental analysis that might alienate key actors, turning instead to an Appreciative Inquiry approach (Watkins and Mohr 2001), focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses. For example, looking at the link between *char*-dwellers and the agricultural extension service, we found cases of farmers actively seeking out the local field worker or even visiting the local Agricultural Extension office to request advice and services. We found that building on this, and exploring how to develop this (still rare) linkage initiative was more constructive than dwelling on the fact that a junior government field worker is (and probably will always be) reluctant to make the long and tiresome journey to the *chars*.

### *Organisational change is difficult*

After completing the research, DEW attempted to find donor funding for its planned interventions aimed at developing links and supporting key actors. So far it has been unsuccessful. Donors and government already have projects that they want grassroots NGOs to implement in the *chars*. The system is not receptive to ideas coming from the grassroots. With the departure of the research team, and lack of support from donors, staff in the *chars* office have found it hard to maintain the momentum of the research, and morale is low.

Reflecting on this experience, we realise that, as is so often the case in development organisations, we have been guilty of encouraging change in our 'target group' while failing

to change ourselves. Following the principles of an actor-oriented approach, DEW needs to look at alternatives to the traditional donor-focused funding channels and develop the opportunities presented by its new partnerships. DEW could also use the determinants diagrams to analyse its relationship with donors, and to think of ways to find support for its new ideas.

## Process monitoring helps: check your nets regularly

During the research period, we found that regular process monitoring promoted partnership building, helping us to review and adapt our behaviour on a regular basis. This was particularly important in relation to some of the political issues discussed above. Examples of changes made during the research period include the adoption of an Appreciative Inquiry approach, and a strategy to identify champions within the government ministries.

The ‘actor linkage matrix’, which gives a visual representation of the links between key actors (see Matsuert *et al.* 2005), helped us to monitor our own performance. We used this to monitor our links with other project actors, record changes that occurred over time, and plan interventions.

## Next steps

DEW continues to seek funding to carry forward plans that have been developed in the research period. In the meantime, as far as is possible without funds, it is attempting to maintain the new links and initiatives made during the study. Based on the observation that there were few linkages among local NGOs, DEW has set up a local NGO co-ordination group. This group is now planning a *chars*-based agricultural fair to build on and develop links with the private sector and service providers.

While we took 12 months to carry out this initial actor-oriented analysis, we believe that the approach can be used successfully in a much shorter PRA-type exercise. Since completing the research reported on in this article, members of our team have used the tools for a shorter analysis of a furniture cluster in Dhaka, and a one-week analysis of personnel relations in the port of Chittagong.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that an actor-oriented approach provides an important addition to the planning, monitoring, and evaluation toolkit. The approach complements more technical methods of project appraisal by focusing on partnerships: addressing the ‘who to work with’ and ‘how to do it’ questions which are essential to the development of sustainable processes. Importantly, these questions can be used to disaggregate groups and to focus on pro-poor or gender-specific issues. Using an actor-oriented approach fosters development interventions that are grounded in local reality, build on local strengths, and use local resources. We believe that using this approach can help DEW to become a more responsive and innovative organisation, and more successful in its mission to bring about real and positive change for people in the *chars*.

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