Qualitative Monitoring Improvement Initiative Pilot for the SHOUHARDO III Program in Bangladesh: A Learning Brief

Background

Emerging evidence and practical guidance for monitoring and evaluation in development and humanitarian practice highlight the value of and need for integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to improve learning and adaptation. This type of 'complexity-aware' approach is particularly important for programs like Resilience Food Security Activities (RFSA) funded by the United States Agency for International Development, Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA). Due to the multiple interventions and stakeholders and the integrated and layered nature of RFSA programming, there are often gaps in understanding when, how and what change happens. These gaps contribute to ineffective learning and adaptive management.

Qualitative methods like —Most Significant Change (MSC), Outcome Mapping (OM), and Outcome Harvesting (OH)—are designed to evaluate change processes. Together these participatory methods (OH, OM, and MSC) enable program staff to monitor whether and how change is happening, including to understand both the significance of changes to those who are experiencing them and how a program or intervention has contributed to change. Strengthening their application and generating and sharing learning related to that practice will improve the overall effectiveness of monitoring, evaluation, adaptation and learning in RFSAs and other complex programs.

In 2022, under a USAID-funded Qualitative Monitoring and Evaluation Program Improvement Award (QPIA) small grant from the IDEAL Activity, CARE implemented a pilot qualitative monitoring activity to test the use of MSC, OM, and OH to monitor progress for RFSAs. This learning brief provides details on the pilot qualitative monitoring activity conducted by Strengthening Household Abilities to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) III, (see Box 1 for an activity summary), summarizing the design and results.[1] In addition, it provides lessons learned and recommendations for M&E and program staff, specifically focused on the effective use of monitoring activities to leverage outcome-focused, participatory methods.

BOX 1 : *The SHOUHARDO III activity*

Strengthening Household Abilities to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) III was a five-year multi-sectoral and integrated program implemented by CARE Bangladesh between 2015 and 2020 and funded by USAID and the Government of Bangladesh. The objective of the program was to improve the lives and livelihoods of 549,000 people living in poor and extreme poor communities in eight districts in the Deep Haor and Remote Char region of northern Bangladesh. The program focused on community-based asset development and women's empowerment, building the capacity of local government and community-service organizations, increasing resilience to frequent shocks and stressors, and improving nutrition and health outcomes for mothers and children under two-years of age. SHOUHARDO III was extended for two years (2020 to 2022) and a second extension phase (SHOUHARDO III Plus) was funded for an additional two years (2022 to 2024). During this period the program will focus on engaging with and linking local service providers with the government and the private sector.

Designing and Implementing the Pilot Qualitative Monitoring Activity

CARE designed this pilot qualitative monitoring activity and the activity conducted by the Hamzari RFSA to generate learnings related to participatory, outcome-focused qualitative monitoring for programs in different stages of the program cycle and with different needs and uses for qualitative-based insights and learnings. The SHOUHARDO III team conducted the pilot monitoring activity between September and October 2022 to generate insights on the sustainability of changes achieved by SHOUHARDO III. Box 2 summarizes the aim, question, audience and uses.

Program interventions
The activity focused on documenting the outcomes of the service provisioning model and how the program contributed to those changes, assessing Local Service Providers (LSPs) providing services in the following three domains:

- on-farm activities (seed agents and vaccinators),
- off-farm activities (Sanchay Sathi[2])
- health and nutrition

Choice of methods
The pilot activity team selected a design blending OH and MSC as they wanted to assess (1) changes among LSPs and in the community related to the service provisioning model, (2) the contribution of SHOUHARDO III to those changes, and (3) the significance of those changes. Additionally, program staff wanted to understand whether there were unexpected or negative changes.

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[1] The Hamzari RFSA conducted also conducted a pilot qualitative monitoring activity. The learning brief can be found here [link to be added when available].
[2] Sanchay Sathi form and maintain savings groups for a fee.

Aim: To understand the changes LSPs have experienced and how those changes are contributing to program impact and sustainability.

Questions:

1. What changes have LSPs experienced regarding whether and how they are providing services, including improved accessibility, prices, and quality of services, provided by local service providers (LSPs)?
2. What is the significance of those changes to LSPs and the community?
3. How has the project contributed to those changes?
4. Whether, how, and to what extent have other actors contributed to the changes?
5. Whether and to what extent are the changes sustainable?
6. What are the main challenges and opportunities for LSPs to continue or further develop and sustain services? What kind of support, capacity, or resources they will need from SHOUHARDO III and other stakeholders for improved quality and sustainability?
7. To what negative or unexpected changes has the project contributed?

Audience: USAID, CARE International and CARE Bangladesh, SHOUHARDO III Plus program staff and implementing partners, and the community.
Uses: adaptive management, program learning, progress reporting.
Activity cycle: Activity end

There are two main reasons why these methods were chosen. First, both OH and MSC are designed to assess unanticipated changes, being focused on collecting outcomes and change stories from program participants and stakeholders. The outcome statements and change stories developed articulate the change that has been experienced, what has contributed to the change, and why the change is important to the person or group experiencing it. Second, OH and MSC can be adapted to generate evidence on sustainability.

OM was not chosen for this pilot because SHOUHARDO III was at the end of the activity cycle. OM is designed to track over time whether changes a program would like to effect are emerging. For this reason, OM typically is used at program inception and then one or more times during the program cycle. In addition, it is not designed to assess the significance of changes or to understand how a program is contributing to change.

Design and implementation

SHOUHARDO III staff participated in a design workshop to select the areas of change to be monitored, the monitoring questions, the uses and users. The outcome of this workshop was a draft protocol and data collection tools. The pilot monitoring activity team conducted a field test in two Upazillas[3] and used the findings to finalize the protocol and data collection tools.

To harvest outcomes and develop most-significant change stories, the activity team conducted a combination of in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). The team conducted IDIs (n=27) with LSPs in four Upazillas in the two program regions (Char and Haor) and FGDs (n=7) with community members in selected Upazillas to substantiate outcomes and to harvest additional outcomes. Additionally, the team conducted MSC interviews with vaccinators (n=7) and private community skilled birth attendants (n=7). The LSPs were asked about changes related to capacity, interpersonal relationships, and professional linkages, motivation, and resources. Additionally, LSPs were asked about the sustainability of the changes they experienced.[4] Among the stories developed for each cadre of LSP interviewed, the program team selected one as the most significant.

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[3] An upazila, formerly called thana, is an administrative division in Bangladesh, functioning as a sub-unit of a district. It can be seen as an analogous to a county or a borough.
[4] Regarding the significant change LSPs reported experiences, they were asked: 1) what difference will this change make in the future? and 2) how can the program support this change moving forward?

Analysis and reporting

After collecting the data, the program team refined the statements of outcome descriptions, significance, and contribution. Program staff participated in a workshop to finalize outcome statements. Once finalized, the pilot activity team collated outcome statements into an Excel database for analysis. Analysis involved the identification of patterns among clusters of outcomes, considering the program's theory of change and monitoring questions. The MSC data—including the two chosen as most significant—were triangulated with the results of the outcome harvest and analyzed separately to assess sustainability of program outcomes.

Results

The pilot study revealed significant changes for LSPs participating in the SHOUHARDO III program (Figure 1). Notably, LSPs reported increased income and the ability to provide more and higher quality services in remote areas of Bangladesh. Results also indicated that LSP technical expertise was enhanced through training, and collaborations with public and private agencies improved service delivery. Results revealed an increase in the LSPs' customer base, leading to higher earnings and income diversification. Finally, the results indicate that SHOUHARDO III made significant contributions to these changes, including through introducing LSPs in the community, raising awareness, and improving their acceptability, and motivating them to excel in their work, which in turn contributed to minimizing the service gap experienced by poor and extreme poor households in the remote regions of the Char and Hoor in Bangladesh.

FIGURE 1: CHANGES EXPERIENCED BY LSPs
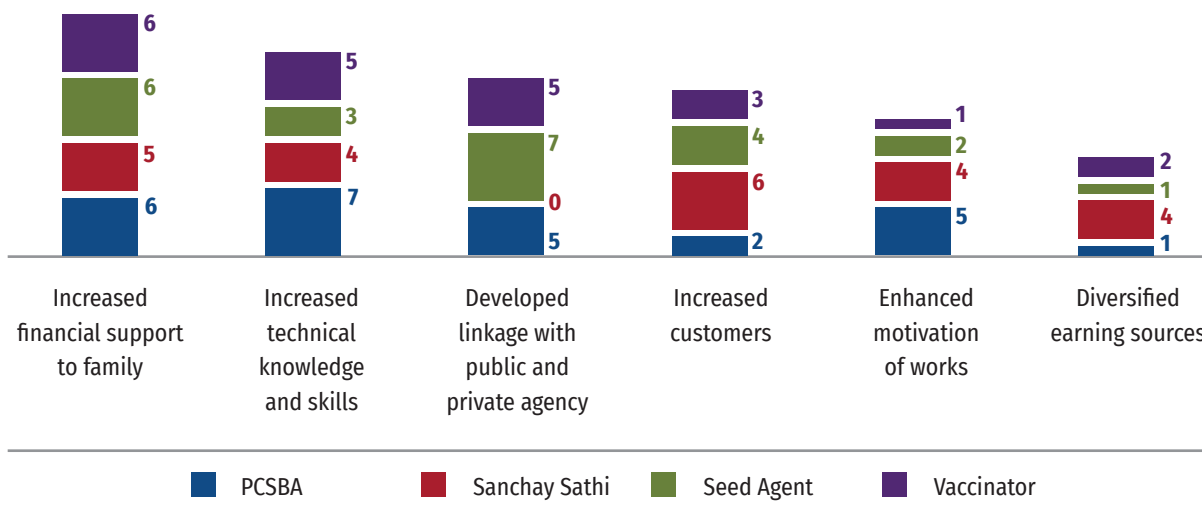
In terms of sustainability, the program had a significant impact on capacity, interpersonal relationships/linkages, and motivation for some LSPs, as indicated by the MSC findings, contributing to their sustained engagement and effectiveness. In terms of program contribution, SHOUHARDO III was characterized as the only or most important contributor for PCSBAs and Sanchay Sathi, while other actors made important contributions for seed agents and vaccinators. Regarding service quality, results indicate that LSPs made critical services accessible and affordable and maintained quality standards in delivery.

Overall, the pilot monitoring activity results provided valuable insights regarding the changes experienced among LSPs in various domains. Importantly, the results confirmed the importance of service quality in terms of accessibility, affordability, and maintaining standards and were useful in adapting the activities for SHOUHARDO III Plus. The team also applied the results and learnings to support integration of the qualitative methods into monitoring and evaluation systems for future projects.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Integrate participatory, outcome-focused monitoring activities early in the program cycle.** The results of the SHOUHARDO III pilot were useful in strengthening the activities for SHOUHARDO III Plus. However, developing and integrating qualitative monitoring activities in early or mid-implementation creates greater opportunities for a) learning how to use all three qualitative approaches, including OM which should be employed in inception or before the end-phase of a project to benefit from the outcome-oriented results framework it produces; b) participation of a broader range of stakeholders—program and partner staff, program participants and community members, government, and others—in monitoring activity design and sensemaking to improve program outcomes; and c) learning how to adapt implementation strategies based on evidence from the monitoring activity. Further, integrating new monitoring activities near to the end of implementation risks making it difficult for technical staff to remain fully engaged throughout the process as their responsibilities may start shifting to new projects.

- **Carefully consider which dimensions of a program would benefit most from participatory, outcome-focused qualitative monitoring and what scale of data collection is feasible for the activity.** The SHOUHARDO III pilot activity was of a modest size (27 IDIs, 7 FDGs, and 7 MSC interviews of LSPs and community members from 8 of the 947 communities where the program operated) and assessed only one of several activities or interventions implemented by the program. The finalization of outcome statements and MSCs, the collation and analysis of data, and reporting and use of the findings required time from many program staff and engaged a broad range of stakeholders, beyond program staff, including to share the results with program communities. The insights developed were useable and valuable. However, as with any monitoring activity, the scope and focus should be highly strategic and well-developed prior to implementation to maximize the quality, applicability, and relevance of results.

- **Plan sufficient time after data collection for analysis and interpretation to support learning and adaptive management and to effectively enable stakeholder participation.** Inclusion of analysis and interpretation support in the pilot activity was appreciated, as this can tend to be forgotten after data collection. However, time for analysis was not sufficient and further insights could have been generated with additional time, especially for understanding and responding to unanticipated and negative programmatic changes. As program teams gain experience with these methods and approaches, it is likely that less time will be required for design and more time can be allocated for analysis, applied learning, and adaptive management. Notwithstanding, there is an inherent tension between effective stakeholder participation in monitoring activities and the timeliness needed for monitoring to be useful to inform project implementation, which needs to be balanced in the design and implementation of this kind of qualitative monitoring activity.
- **Blending methods can allow for a more streamlined design, while capturing credible data highly relevant for answering monitoring questions.** The SHOUHARDO III team was keen to understand what changes had emerged for LSPs and in communities where they were operating—which was possible leveraging the process of OH. In addition, they wanted to generate insights on sustainability—which was possible leveraging the process of MSC. Adapting the MSC approach by generating fewer stories than would typically be required for generalizable results and by opting for a less participatory approach for selecting the most significant change, the activity captured sufficient data on sustainability while requiring less time and resources. Further, generating data on changes through two different sources of data collection allowed for data triangulation, which strengthens the validity of the findings.

The full pilot monitoring activity report is available here, including the consent and data collection forms,.

CONTACT INFORMATION
Caitlin Shannon, Research Lead, CARE USA (caitlin.shannon@care.org)
Eyasin Al Sarker, Senior Team Leader-M&E, CARE Bangladesh (eyasinali.sarker@care.org)
Raquib Hassan, Technical Advisor, Food Security and Resilience Team, CARE USA (raquibul.hasan@care.org)
Richard Smith, Consultant (rdsmith27@gmail.com)