CARE Bangladesh
SHOUHARDO III

DFSA Learning Tour Report

Photo: The DFSA Partners in Bangladesh with the women’s savings group in Purba Bahadurpur village, Islampur upazila, Jamalpur district, where CARE’s SHOUHARDO III works. ©Apel Pavel/CARE

CARE’s SHOUHARDO III hosted the two other Development Food Security Activity’s in Bangladesh – Hellen Keller International’s SAPLING and World Vision’s Nobo Jatra. This activity is part of the program’s continuous Collaboration, Learning and Adaptation in engaging relevant stakeholders in the country. SHOUHARDO III took the partners’ staff to Islampur upazila in Jamalpur district, some 200 kilometers north of the capital Dhaka for two days from 2-3 September 2019. They visited program areas and shared the key progress made by SHOUHARDO III as it works among Poor and Extreme Poor (PEP) people in the remote communities.

Specifically, the visit aimed to (a) showcase the work by CARE and SHOUHARDO III, (b) present the community-level adjustments in Jamalpur following sustainability-anchored interventions and transition that are reflected in various groups that SHOUHARDO III is supporting and (c) observe the Government of Bangladesh and private sector’s role in the overall program implementation and how their networks on the ground supported CARE. The learning visit team met with:

a) Adult male groups – composed of maize farmers and fathers of children under five who were involved in previous SHOUHARDO III interventions such as Farmers’ Field Business School (FFBS), courtyard sessions for Maternal and Child Health
Nutrition (MCHN) and male counterparts of Empowerment Knowledge and Transformative Action (EKATA) members;

b) Adult female groups – composed of mothers of children under five and other women who were part of the previous Core Occupational Group, EKATA and MCHN groups

c) Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) – composed of female members who were both part of the previous and new VSLAs formed in the villages;

d) Union Disaster Volunteers (UDVs) – under the Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC) are the community members who responds and mobilizes the village in times of disasters

e) Union Parishad (UP) – the person in-charge of the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh, who provides support to SHOUHARDO III in carrying out its work in the communities

f) Youth groups and adolescent boys – are the young participants (age 18-25) of the program who received vocational training and have been engaged to support women’s empowerment efforts of SHOUHARDO III

The two-day activity ended with a debrief session whereby the visitors and SHOUHARDO III staff exchanged conversations with DFSA Partners based on the key observations, findings and reflections from the visit.

I. **SHOUHARDO III status quo.** This section describes SHOUHARDO III context on transition and sustainability-anchored approaches. The DFSA partners were particularly interested on the overall approach, and the explanation below factored their reflections and observations

- **Transition as a process**

  All the changes taking place in SHOUHARDO III were made in response to the Midterm Evaluation’s findings and recommendations. The DFSA teams visited two villages in Islampur Upazila – Kachima and Purba Bahadurpur – both of which were progressing with SHOUHARDO III’s community-level adjustments in terms of groups reformation and facilitation of applying knowledge and skills from the previous program approaches – FFBS for farmers, MCHN for mothers and PLW, and EKATA for women and adolescent girls.

  Key results were evident in both villages: (1) thriving maize production, (2) successful private sector engagement where a trader from Aftab Bahumukhi Farms Ltd. consistently engaged with SHOUHARDO III-trained farmers on selling maize in bulk, (3) women applying essential skills in taking care of their children including exclusive breastfeeding and careful choices in diet, and (4) men and boys are aware of their roles in supporting women and refraining from gender-based violence.

SHOUHARDO III explained to DFSA partners that while the previous groups interventions turned out positively as mentioned above, re-forming them based on their age, gender and location (proximity to one another) aims at strengthening these results – groups are means, not an end – with the focus on the participants moving forward with their lives with minimal support from the program.

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1 SHOUHARDO III re-calibrated its VSLA approach after the Midterm Evaluation’s recommendation to follow minimum USAID standards
The program took on the transition process carefully, with an ‘exit’ meeting held with the volunteers who used to ‘run the show’ at the village-level (they were replaced with Field Trainers based at the unions). In this meeting, the program staff explained to participants the changes taking place, what they were for and how the change can take place smoothly through cooperation between the program and the participants. The program acknowledges that to change the course after three and a half years, it would require a different level of Collaboration, Learning and Adaptation to ensure that all efforts exerted in the initial years would be enough basis to move forward and even surpass what the groups achieved by far. The new groups may be new, but the members are the same people. However, the short visit indicated that the transition will not be in the same pace for all villages. In the VSLA group that the team met with during the visit, was an example that some work will need to be done, where not all female members could tie what they learned from EKATA to their new involvement in the savings group. SHOUHARDO III will proactively monitor progress and refine its approaches and implementation based on the evolving context and realities.

- **Reforming groups towards sustainability**
  The groups initially set up by the program namely Empowerment Knowledge and Transformative Action (EKATA), Farmers’ Field Business Schools (FFBS), and Mother Leaders and Youth Groups – were reformed into five main groups to include: (1) male adult groups (with members 18 years old and above), (2) female adult groups (with members 18 years old and above), (3) adolescent girls and (4) adolescent boys who are neither married nor in school, and (5) young mothers and new brides (aged up to 25). This reformation was the result of a community consultative process following the Midterm Evaluation (MTE) to ensure that the needs of all program participants are met, particularly in improving their lives and livelihoods, regardless of age. The groups reformation is based solely on community-led programming which went in full swing in SHOUHARDO III’s fourth year. This follows the self-selection method where the members have the freedom which group meets their aspirations, convenience in gathering at any particular date and time, and be with others they can trust. On top of these, the program promotes having (a) linkages both with private and public sector, (2) problem solving ability and (3) cohesion, an important component that aims for the members to stick together, and agree on a schedule to meet regularly, among others.

Reforming the groups also entailed that all participants are included, and this refers to the new/young mothers and newly-wed women, who tend to be vulnerable, especially when they moved to a different village after their wedding and in need of social capital, as well as, but not limited to: support on how to take care of their children, and venturing into livelihood activities.

SHOUHARDO III's sustainability approach is anchored on two main areas – service provision and demand creation. As the groups are benefitting from the from the results of previous program interventions (such as on-farm and non-farm activities, Health, Hygiene and Nutrition, Water and Sanitation, Disaster and Climate Risk Management, women’s empowerment and improved governance), this could be their leverage to demand/negotiate with private and public actors for continued, sustained service provision after the program exits. Thus far, and as seen in the villages that the DFSA team visited, SHOUHARDO III’s efforts on lobbying with government resulted to improved services from the Department of Agricultural Extension – in regular vaccination of livestock and poultry, and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in mobilizing staff to make Community Clinics functional. In addition, the linkages established with the GoB health services, especially for Growth
Monitoring and Promotion sessions will help the transition of community-based activities to the government’s health services.

II. Cross-learning discussion. This section explains the exchange of insights among DFSA partners based on their experiences and what SHOUHARDO III could learn from them

DFSA partners follow certain graduation process

World Vision’s Nobo Jatra has a dedicated ultra-poor graduation component, which has been adapted to local context and follows a chronological sequence of activities including entrepreneurial literacy, skills development, consumption smoothing cash transfers, business plan development, asset transfer and mentoring. Certain criteria are used to ascertain if individuals are considered to have sustainably graduated from extreme poverty. Mandatory requirements include having productive assets, certain amount of savings, WASH capacity, knowledge on Disaster Risk Reduction, girls not married before 18, two sources of income and three meals a day. SHOUHARDO III, on the other hand, approaches graduation as a qualitative process and for groups, instead of individual. Coaching, mentoring and training for staff are simultaneously taking place for areas that need support to facilitate a holistic approach to graduation. Community mobilization efforts are ongoing in parallel so that groups continue to build their capacities on cohesion, horizontal and vertical linkages, and problem solving capacity.

Local service providers – are participants really going to pay for services?
SHOUHARDO III started its work on establishing network of service providers at the local level. One of the initiatives is mobilizing Village Agents-VA’s (who come from existing groups, as outstanding members) to provide VSLA services with additional scope in providing socio-economic messages to the groups, for a fee.

In Nobo Jatra’s experience, where they mobilized VAs for a year now, there appears to be a general reluctance from VSLA members to pay for VAs. To address this, Nobo Jatra is taking an incremental approach to i) build understanding through existing groups and structures (VDCs, Union Parishad etc) on why VA’s are a value addition to the sustainability of the VSLA groups and ii) exploring other models to further sustain, expand and grow VSLAs (agent banking for example). SHOUHARDO III acknowledges this possibility and will work on ensuring the added value of Vas, as well as other potential local service providers who were being groomed to provision of essential services.

VSLA is in different stages of implementation among DFSA partners
VSLA is SHOUHARDO III’s platform, and not a separate adult female group. The program just re-calibrated in rolling out VSLA following certain standards, and all members are female by far. This is expected to roll out to adult male, adolescent girls and boys, as well as youth. It is also worth-noting that VSLA set the example on self-selection when they started forming. The VSLAs of Nobo Jatra is set for expansion to other participants especially for the youth groups.

Learning through piloting
To ensure sustained services - starting in the final year when the project starts to phase out and through the two-year cost extension, WV is partnering with Social Marketing Company
(SMC), to adapt and pilot an established business model engaging Community Sales Agents (CSAs) to sell health and nutrition commodities.

By piloting this model (starting in FY19) to transition a proportion of Nobo Jatra’s Lead Mothers and Community Nutrition Facilitators (CNFs) into fee earning CSA’s – the assumption is that since these CNFs and mothers have already been intensely involved in nutrition outreach – they will be able to also provide messaging on issues that cannot be monetized – such as breastfeeding advice. Importantly, CSA’s will also have contact/entry points (courtyard sessions, household visits and Government nutrition outreach activities) to at least talk about health and nutrition when they meet with prospective clients.

SHOUHARDO, similarly, is exploring on piloting implementation models in the areas of VSLA, Health, Hygiene and Nutrition, and WASH. It was agreed to share progress of the pilot activities between the two programs, and utilize any compelling lesson during the pilot process. This is crucial in following USAID’s framework on Collaboration, Learning and Adaptation, where cross-learning takes place among DFSA partners in Bangladesh.

Mother Leader model
In SAPLING’s experience, this turned out not to be very sustainable. The primary reason is that the services that were provided by the Mother Leaders in the communities were only limited to children under two years of age. For Nobo Jatra, they are using mixed approaches in mobilizing Mother Leaders such as SMC and BRAC models. Taking on these reflections, SHOUHARDO III will look at what additional services that Mother Leaders can provide so that they cater to the greater needs of the communities. One of the potential solutions is linking the Mother Leaders to the local health systems through the Union Parishad. Working with standing committees of the Union Parishad had an advantage for other DFSA partners as they have very specific roles in areas that the participants need support on such as agricultural extension, essential health services and responding to disasters.

Specific case of Union Disaster Volunteers (UDVs)
UDVs are under the Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC) who primarily mobilizes the communities in times of disasters. SHOUHARDO III trained them on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) for a certain period. Moving forward, tying them back to Ministry of Disaster Management’s community-level efforts in responding to disasters is being looked at as a viable solution. Simultaneously, the UDVs can also work closely with the community groups being formed to strengthen essential knowledge gained from the previous years on DRR. The UDVs, too, are part of the community engagement efforts and will be included in group conversations on the changes taking place.

There is no single strategy to achieve sustainable food security programming
From this visit, the DFSA teams acknowledged that programming can be very dynamic, especially when aiming for sustainable approaches, particularly in the various contexts that they work in Bangladesh. It is important to provide tailor-made interventions to meet the needs of all the participants.

In the end, the people in the communities are the ones in-charge of their lives. They will be the one to carry on after the programs’ closure. Development programs should think with an end in mind – for example, by considering the potential actors on the ground from day one who could be tapped/collaborated with in delivering essential services to the communities after program closure. This also involves working with all actors in every intervention for a collective approach in achieving results.
Next steps

The learning tour turned out to be very fruitful for all DFSA Partners. SHOUHARDO III is also looking forward to visit Nobo Jatra and SAPLING areas in the near future and collaborate proactively to continuously improve program quality in reaching the most vulnerable in all corners of Bangladesh. There is also an ample opportunity for combined learning and sharing of best practices between three DFSA’s here. USAID’s Food for Peace has shown an interest in VSLA’s and they are a binding theme across all three DFSA’s in Bangladesh. Specifically, a VSLA event tentatively scheduled for December, to be held in SAPLING’s area Bandarban is being considered by the three organizations as this approach turned out to be a prominent learning area given the differences on how the programs progressed in this particular component.