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From 'having the will' to 'knowing the way': Incremental transformation for poverty alleviation among rural women in Bangladesh

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Abstract
Short-term, linear, externally funded, project-based approaches to complex problems like women's poverty in rural Bangladesh are often unsuccessful. Taking a different approach, this paper documents a transdisciplinary action-research methodology that led to sustainable poverty alleviation for rural Bangladeshi women, gradual changes in gender relations at the household and community level and strengthened women's capabilities while simultaneously developing an approach to social entrepreneurship. Defining characteristics of this research process were clear articulation of objectives in which poverty alleviation always received priority, learning cycles in which women were the central actors of the research-action process, and fluid and changing leadership among different stakeholders at different stages in the process. The project demonstrates the strength of action-research in addressing complex challenges, such as poverty alleviation and unequal gender relations. Key lessons for development practice include the need for interventions that take place over a longer time-frame and for a vision of development that is not transformational but comprising small incremental, locally embedded changes and which recognises the role of social capital.

Keywords
Bangladesh, interactive learning and action, social capital, social entrepreneurship, transdisciplinary research, women

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Poverty alleviation in rural Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in Asia with some 47 million people living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2013). About 80% of the population lives in rural areas where poverty has a higher prevalence than in urban environments (USAID, 2012). The burden of poverty is unequally distributed between the sexes with women facing particular inequality in terms of reproductive health, access to the labour market (UNDP, 2015) and nutritional status (Scaling up Nutrition, 2014). Through limitations in women's empowerment, for example with a low mobility due to the social norms of *purdah* or female seclusion, women's opportunities for income generation outside the home are restricted (Das & Mohiuddin, 2015). In 2006, PRIDE, a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), decided to set up the Route to Sustainable Development Project in Jessore District, Kulna Division, western Bangladesh, with the specific objective of developing sustainable poverty alleviation strategies in a participatory way. PRIDE decided to employ a transdisciplinary methodology called Interactive Learning and Action (ILA). Initially focused on both male and female members of poor households, the men dropped out over time because they had other opportunities as day labourers. From 2009, all participants were women. The project was located in Jessore District, selected by the proximity of PRIDE in Jessore rather than any formal criteria. Some 48–60% of the population in Jessore District are below the poverty line of USD 2 per day (Islam, Islam & Sadath, 2012). These people are landless with, at best, a small garden to grow vegetables or raise one or two chickens. They live in rudimentary houses with jute plants or sacks for walls, and roofs made of palm leaves. Their clothes are hung up on ropes and a small tin box is generally their only furniture. Sanitation facilities, if any, are represented by a hole in the ground. They cannot afford to eat more than two meals a day, sometimes only one meal, and cannot afford fish or meat. As one participant noted:

> We do not have our own land, we are on the government land. If my husband doesn't work we cannot eat. It happens often, and we do not get any help from other people. (Menoka, beneficiary)

Various researchers from the Athena Institute – a research arm at the Vrije University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands – were involved in the project and reflected with PRIDE staff on progress and challenges. This was done face-to-face during visits to Bangladesh, but also via e-mail and telephone. Four of the authors (AS, JM, MZ and JB) visited the project at various intervals, ranging from one week to three months. In addition, five Masters' students from the VU visited the project for three months and wrote their Masters' thesis on the project, and another researcher visited the project. The further author (SC) was involved at a later stage in the data analysis.

The transdisciplinary action research methodology: ILA

The ILA methodology can be considered a form of transdisciplinary action research and has any similarities to action research and its myriad offshoots and offspring. Developed during the 1980s and 1990s by Bunders and Broerse at the Athena Institute (Broerse, 1998; Bunders, 1990), the approach has supported diverse multi-stakeholder processes aimed at inclusive agricultural, health, and biotechnological innovation.[1] PRIDE staff had previously used the ILA methodology while working at the Grameen Kishi Foundation (GKF), supported by the Athena Institute (Zweekhorst, 2004). For this new project, they again asked the Athena Institute for support in the use of the ILA methodology and in the implementation of the project. Given that PRIDE was aiming to develop an approach to sustainable development which would largely rely on communities' own resources, there was no intention to fund the project in the traditional sense. The Athena Institute contributed less than €10,000 per annum to support monitoring activities, while PRIDE provided some funds from its seed project. The project was different to a standard development project as explained by a member of PRIDE staff in an interview in March 2011:

> So we start from their problem …. We are providing training. Other organizations would think their job is finished [when they have given the training]. For us, that's when our job starts: then we visit. We don't just advise [the women]. We like to see how much progress [they have made]. What is their thinking? We are sharing their information and our information. Our duty doesn't end after finishing the training. We don't burden them with other problems. We don't press our ideas on them, otherwise it would bring problems for them.

The ILA approach comprises five phases: initiation and preparation; collection, exchange and integration of information; integration; priority setting and planning; and implementation (Zweekhorst, 2004). The timelines for each of the phases and the activities involved as it relates to this project can be seen in Table 1. After the reconnaissance, a series of learning cycles occurred continuously (phases 4 and 5), similar to the action research spiral of Kemmis and McTaggert (1988) (Figure 1). Every cycle consists of revised planning, action, observation and reflection after which a new cycle starts. Seven learning cycles took place, encompassing setting priorities, planning and implementation. Figure 2 summarises important aspects of these seven cycles, and arranges them within a larger process of 'experimentation', 'implementation' and 'scaling up' phases of the overall action inquiry process.

Prior to the project, identified as the 'pre-reconnaissance phase',[2] the Athena Institute had worked with the GKF's Technology Assessment Unit. At the end of the project, staff of the Unit left GKF to start their own NGO, PRIDE, because they did not fit well into the more hierarchical structure of GKF. PRIDE was created with the motto 'Farmers help themselves', aiming to stimulate sustainable

Table 1. An overview of ILA phases and timelines.

Description	Dates	ILA phase	Activities
Pre-reconnaissance	1998–2004		Involvement in ILA project and training with the GKF project (Zweekhorst, 2004)
Reconnaissance	2004–2006	1. Initiation and preparation	Context is analysed and the research team established
		2. Collection, exchange and integration of information	Perspectives, needs and interests of the different stakeholders are identified, analysed and integrated
		3. Integration	Knowledge perspectives and needs of the different stakeholders are integrated
Action research cycles	2007–2012	4. Priority setting and planning	Stakeholders to reflect on the previous phase's results, set priorities and plan the next phase
		5. Implementation	Specific projects are formulated and implemented

development, not relying on subsidies. Based on their work with the GKF, PRIDE was familiar with the ILA and wanted to employ it again in its new project.

During the reconnaissance phase (2004–2006), PRIDE and the Athena Institute started to analyse the needs of poor rural households in the Jessore area. In order to learn more from the local context, we started with participatory visualisation methods. Various visualisations of the local surroundings were made by the community members. The community members themselves decided what they wanted to show to us and we only asked for clarification. This was followed by various walks through the village in which the community members showed us important features of the local surroundings. This provided insight into, amongst other things, the local area, the assets of local people and the composition of the various households and the constraints and challenges they face.

Next, we gained more detailed insights into specific topics which were selected by the community members. For example, from visualisation of the day-to-day activities (daily time use chart), we learnt that several families only had two meals a day and lived, literally, a hand to mouth existence. Moreover, the second meal was often late in the evening so the children sometimes even missed this meal because they were already asleep. Women of these families were very willing to discuss this constraint further in a focus group and to assess with the team opportunities to

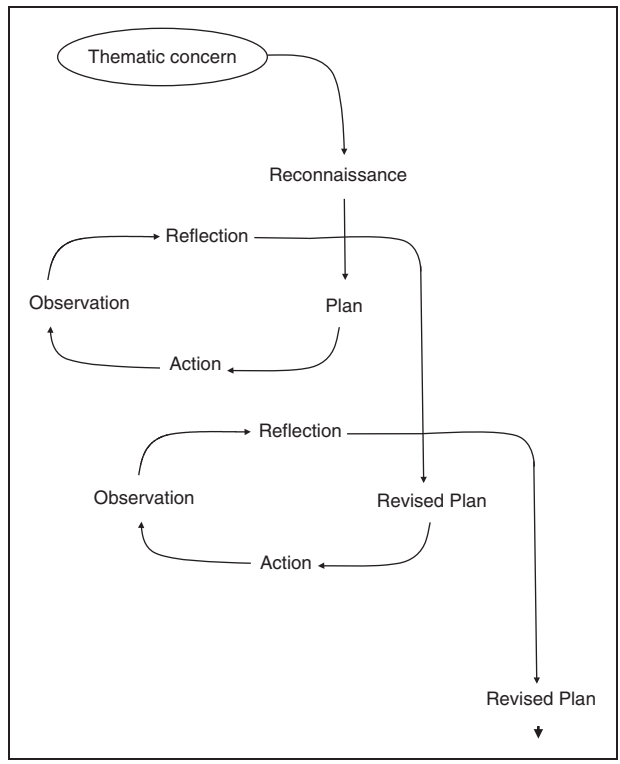

Figure 1. Action research spiral (after Kemmis & McTaggert, 1988).

improve the situation. We learnt that the husbands of these very poor families work, for example as rickshaw drivers. The husband buys food (most often vegetables) from the money earned during the day and then comes home. As there is no other food in house, the wife has to wait for his return before she can start cooking. In a group discussion with the women, we considered whether a small vegetable garden would improve their situation.

The identification of the possible solution 'vegetable garden', resulted in the identification of three new constraints. First, no land was available for a vegetable garden. The project team, in collaboration with the women, became very creative, using space in and around the houses, under the washing line, against the walls of the house, and space above water. Second, although seeds were sold in the market in small quantities (5–10 g), these were too large quantities for women to afford. The women only needed 3–4 seeds for each vegetable. This constraint was addressed by PRIDE who provided the seeds in these very small quantities. Third, women did not know how to cultivate the seeds. Therefore, training was developed to teach the women to cultivate vegetables. To assess how the women were getting on, the team visited the vegetables plots of the women. One challenge

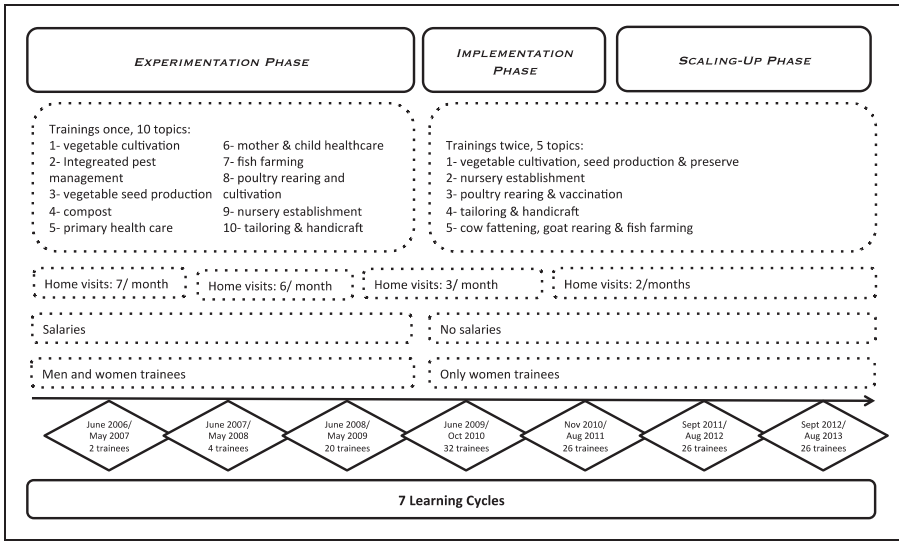

Figure 2. Overview of the stages and learning cycles.

or opportunity led to the next elaboration, and there was an increasing urgency to experiment as new opportunities arose. It was then necessary to test whether an opportunity would improve the situation of the poor because these people are so poor they could not risk failure. In addition, the question arose of how to train local community members most efficiently to make the most of these new opportunities. This issue was addressed in cycle one.

In a similar way, these and other opportunities and challenges were discussed by the project team and community members. Depending on the topic, the community members sometimes preferred to discuss these issues alone, sometimes in small groups when dealing with sensitive issues and sometimes in larger groups. Suitable methods were chosen to facilitate these discussions, including in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions (FGDs), visual ethnography (photo-voice methodology), questionnaires, and participant observations. These different methods were selected and implemented by members of the Athena team (together with translators), PRIDE staff, and a local research assistant. In this phase, PRIDE also started to develop criteria for the selection of Upazillas (sub-districts) and villages.

The learning cycles in practice: Developing an embedded approach to poverty alleviation

Cycle 1: June 2006–May 2007. During the first learning cycle, the project team deepened their understanding of the context and identified community constraints and opportunities. Staff and students of the Athena Institute were in Bangladesh for over three months and PRIDE facilitated participatory village maps that helped

identify poor households. In this way, PRIDE met two women who were relatively successful compared to other women in their village. These women were already conducting some income generating activities (IGAs) and were interested to experiment with home-based gardening and backyard poultry rearing.

To protect them from risk, the women received a very small monthly stipend. PRIDE helped them experiment with vegetable production and fish raising in micro ponds. Intermediaries also experimented with how to engage other women. An important learning of this phase was the characteristics of a successful intermediary, such as being poor, with rudimentary education, and married, characteristics that would grow and evolve throughout the program.

Cycle 2: June 2007–May 2008. Armed with knowledge of what makes for success, four additional intermediaries were selected through participatory mapping with the community members. In keeping with local norms, before approaching the women, husbands and in-laws were asked for permission to involve them. After this, the women themselves were asked in.

PRIDE trained these four women to conduct home-based gardening and poultry rearing. They were asked to identify other local women interested in starting IGAs who became their beneficiaries. Knowledge now began to flow in two ways: from PRIDE to intermediaries via training, and from intermediaries to beneficiary networks. For example one woman taught others how she managed to protect her gourd from pests using an old sari she had wrapped around it. Intermediaries and their beneficiary networks experimented with vegetable and fruit cultivation (on small pieces of land not exploited before or on pergolas above houses), poultry rearing in the backyard, or fish cultivation.

At this point in the project process, PRIDE and community members became increasingly aware that lack of social capital represented a barrier to accessing resources and hence constrained the ability of women to achieve a sustainable livelihood: women were expected to stay at home, unable to move about the village freely on their own and were also restricted in their ability to interact with other women. As one woman noted:

> People who have lots of friends, who communicate freely with others, they progress. But people who are poor, who cannot communicate nicely, their progress is not like that. They don't know other people, they cannot get information. (Nasrin, beneficiary)

Purdah also restricted women from engaging in IGAs outside the homestead because of social control enforced by gossip:

> Other people talk, they ask: 'You have a husband, why do you work?' Therefore my husband says you need not to work, stay inside, but I need to work or we can't survive. I have to stop working otherwise there will be conflicts with my husband. I am afraid he will divorce me. (Jasmin, beneficiary)

These dominant social customs and norms became important to how the project would proceed, as women respected and maneuvered within their boundaries, boundaries crucial to social capital in the community.

Cycle 3: June 2008–May 2009. Participatory mapping and discussions with communities let to 20 more women, each from a different village, to become intermediaries. During this cycle, PRIDE trained only intermediaries and intermediaries independently trained their beneficiaries. Intermediaries were trained in 10 topics: vegetable cultivation, integrated pest management, vegetable seed production, composting, primary health care, mother and child healthcare, fish cultivation, poultry rearing, nursery establishment, tailoring and handicraft. Beneficiary activities remained in the homestead with intermediaries moving within their own village to monitor activities or collect handicrafts.

Cycle 4: June 2009–October 2010. In 2009, the project was extended to another 32 intermediaries in 32 new villages. The Athena Institute visited to inquire into the necessity of stipends. Evaluating that they were unnecessary, the researchers convinced PRIDE to cease payments to new and previous trainees: all participants remained active in the project, proof of its benefits. Another incremental change in the project in this phase was that intermediaries moving forward would have to be either married or divorced: young, unmarried women had stopped participating because their movement was frowned upon. The phase also saw a focusing of training to the most profitable topics: (1) vegetable and seed production, (2) tree nursery management, (3) backyard poultry rearing and vaccination, (4) tailoring and handicrafts, and (5) farm management including a variety of topics such as fish production and goat rearing.

Cycle 5: November 2010–August 2011. In the fifth learning cycle, the Athena team sought to understand impacts on women's lives. The inquiry was intensive and predominantly qualitative and some of the most robust insights were generated by photo-voice (Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996). Participants were given disposable cameras, asked only to portray 'changes in their lives' since joining the program, then left on their own. Two weeks later, women came together to discuss their photos.

Pride in the photos was palpable. Some took pictures of their vegetables, demonstrating their ability to grow them and collect seeds.[3] Women had also learned to identify land previously unconsidered for cultivation:

> I am 25 years old, and Muslim. I am married, my husband makes furniture, and he is employed. I have one son, he is 4 years old, and one daughter, and she is 10 years old. I have been a beneficiary for 1½ year (...) This is the nolukhal plant that I am now growing in that narrow space between the ponds. (Mukta, beneficiary)

The photographs documented the importance of peer-to-peer assistance:

> I am 22 years old, and a Muslim. I am married to a businessman working in a grocery shop but I live with my parents. I have been divorced for 2 years now. I have been to school up to class 11, I can read and write. I am a member of Toura (the intermediary) for 2 years now (. . .) It is a group of neighbouring women. I sit with 15 to 20 women, they know I am learning from Toura so they are very much interested. When I have been trained by Toura, I train them. In the group, they ask questions, but they also come to me at other times to listen to my suggestions. (Sherina, beneficiary)

Intermediaries and beneficiaries emphasised their involvement with others, and how the project had given them the opportunity to enhance their relationships. Numerous photos showed women helping other women in their fields, and of handing vegetables to other women. Indeed, when women described change, they framed it as exchange of gifts. In their eyes, they gave gifts of seeds, and received gifts of vegetables or seeds in return, representing a form of barter.

Another woman portrayed change by staging before and after photos: children washing in a pond only with water versus children washing with soap, or unsanitary latrine versus sanitary latrine. In some of the photographs, women demonstrated very complex changes, including evidence of empowerment. For example one woman staged a photograph with her husband in which she was giving him money, representing her new power to earn income and contribute to the household income:

> I am 45 years old, I am Muslim, I am married, and I have 2 daughters and 2 sons. I have been an intermediary for 1 year (. . .) I can now buy the things for my children to study. I do not depend anymore on my husband (. . .) In this photo, I am giving money to my husband. (Rebeka, intermediary)

The ability to send daughters to school was an important theme. One woman staged a photograph of her whole family discussing the education of her daughter:

> I am 24 years old. I am Hindu. I am married, my husband works as a hairdresser for someone in Jessore. I have one son who is 7 years old and one daughter who is 11 years old. I have started 2 years ago as a beneficiary. I went to school up to class 4, so I can sign my name. I married when I was around 11 years old. I live with my husband, my children and my mother in law. (. . .) In this photo, it is me, my husband and my daughter. (Anamika, beneficiary)
>
> Is it a family picture? (Researcher)
>
> No! On this picture we are making the decision together of sending our daughter to school to class 6 and on how to pay. Before I was dependent on my husband, and now

> he takes suggestions from me. As I am a beneficiary of Malika (intermediary) and earning money so now we take decisions together. (Anamika)

In this project, women did not confront dominant practices. Instead, they negotiated their empowerment. Women reported proudly that they contributed to the family income and that their husbands now 'love them more', but they did not report stories of confrontations. They navigated within boundaries using tact and patience:

> We are making the meetings at times when it doesn't hamper with our husbands (...) First they were doubtful whether it will be beneficial, now they think it is good, they are happy. The family members were interested but the neighbours were doubtful. Now they are supporting us because they see the house is cleaner, we eat more, we are more solvent. (Rina, intermediary)

In this cycle, it became clear that women were meeting dual objectives by being involved in the project, namely contributing to the development of their community while developing themselves. Women became 'do- gooders' in the eyes of their community with their gifts having a symbolic importance, providing the women with higher status and greater networks. Women were becoming social entrepreneurs: creating social value but also harnessing economic value.

Cycles 6–7: September 2011–August 2012 and September 2012–August 2013. During the final stages, the project explicitly targeted social entrepreneurship (Maas, 2013; Maas et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d) and scale-up. Criteria for selecting villages and women became explicit and applied systematically (Table 2). The candidates for social entrepreneurship needed to be married, divorced or widowed; to be able to write, have good networking, communication, organisational and interpersonal skills and an eagerness to learn; be at least 25 years of age; have children over 5 years of age; and be from the poorest group in the village. These criteria relate to women's individual skills and education, but also their ability to move around the village. In 2011, 26 women were trained to be become social entrepreneurs (Cycle 6) and in 2012 another 26 women were trained (Cycle 7). The project is continuing to train women every year since 2012, although the research team from the Athena Institute is no longer formally involved.

Discussion of the project from the perspective of action research

In this discussion, we consider the defining characteristics of the project, its development impact and lessons for development practice. To establish these aspects of the project, we use some of the main 'choicepoints' for action research in an effort to be 'transparent about the choicepoints we make and about the limitations that come as a result of these choices' (Bradbury Huang, 2010,

Table 2. Selection criteria used by the community members, NGO staff and research team members.

Village selection criteria	Intermediary selection criteria
Housing: over 50% of houses made of mud, bamboo, straw, tin; less than 30% having access to sanitation facility	Married or divorced female, minimum 25 years old (married for long time to avoid criticisms)
Women poverty: less than 5% of women have any form of income, practice of dowry prevalent, cases of women's repression and of child marriages in the village.	Education: class 5 to class 10, eagerness to learn and do new activities
Infrastructure: over 70% of roads are mud road, no connection to main roads/no bus service, less than 20% of the village has access to electricity, no market in the village, no health care (only quack doctors)	Social skills: good networking skills, good interpersonal behaviour, communicative, no 'communalism' i.e. not focused on one group of people (e.g. Muslims or Hindus)
Employment: over 70% of the population living from daily wages; day labour opportunities limited; low day labour wage; less than 20% of the population has a government job contract	Organising skills (e.g. clean household), problem solving capacities
Land: 8–10% landless people, over 40% of homestead area suitable for vegetable cultivation, government has land or rich farmer fallow land available	Allowed by their family to move around in the village
Density: over 650 people/m^2	From poorest group of their village (as per wealth ranking maps performed by community)
Practical for PRIDE: less than 10 km from branch office, terrorism free	With children at least 5 years old (to allow free time for IGAs)
Lack of support: few/no other NGOs in the village, less than 5% of people have food support from the government, flawed village social justice. Education level: less than 25% finished second grade.	Fit and active (many poor are sick and unable to work)

p. 101). The choicepoints comprise the articulation of objectives; working with practitioners in a participatory mode; contribution to action research theory, practice and methods; reflexivity and actionability; and significance, namely whether the lessons from this project are relevant to other development projects (Bradbury Huang, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, we also add an additional

'choicepoint', namely development impact. Space consideration does not allow us to fully address all of these choicepoints. We focus on three: contribution to action research theory/practice/methods; relevance to other projects, and development impact.

Contribution to action research theory, practice and methods

The paper links to a body of knowledge on ILA, described in more detail above and coming from the tradition of transdisciplinary research, similar to other action research methodologies. It is consistent with the understanding that action research is '... a broad church, movement or family of highly desirable activities' (McTaggart, 1994, p. 314). It contributes to theory and practice by demonstrating how a development project, implemented using an action research process, can bring about gradual, positive change based on local realities.

Participation in practice: Shifting leadership

Although many different methods were employed during the lifetime of the project, visual methods appeared particularly adapted to elicit information through participatory action research as has been shown in other settings (e.g. street children: Young & Barret, 2009). In particular, the photo-voice method appeared to be particularly powerful in allowing participants to demonstrate what they perceived as benefits of the project and what they identified as opportunities. This community-based participatory method enables women, despite limited literacy to 'record and reflect their lives [...] from their own point of view' (Wang et al., 1996, p. 1). The women explained to each other with pride how they were succeeding, how their families and in particular their husband loved them more. Women analysed not only the activities they had engaged in but also the paths they had taken. For example, one participant took a photo of a young man from her village who had been through many difficulties in his life and had now a university degree and a successful career. She explained that he was not part of the project but that he had also experienced 'the struggle' but that she 'didn't otherwise know how to show the struggle in a photo'; his photo was used to symbolise the struggle that she had faced in developing IGAs. The women also explored paths they wanted to take. For example one beneficiary who had just started to plant seeds took a vegetable in a picture and she said it was a gift for her intermediary. However, she then explained she could not yet give it as a gift but wanted to do so as soon as she had cultivated enough vegetables. The women also explained to each other with pride how they were succeeding and how their families, and in particular their husbands, loved them more. They were able to tell their stories with the help of photos. Other important tools were the participatory visualisation which also facilitated *conscientisation* (as from Freire developed epistemology) but also discussions with local people.

However, our main aim was to facilitate emergence of poverty alleviation strategies truly efficient and sustainable. Hence, while participatory action research was a best fit approach, it incorporated photographs, drawings or shared dialogue in focus-group discussions we also mixed in more traditional research methods, such as evaluations through questionnaires. Moreover, while putting women's and community voices at the centre of the research-action project was paramount, there was also the reality of sometimes externally stimulating decision-making and planning. In part, therefore, our research is a story about how university-bound, foreign action researchers in collaboration with a local NGO can help shift planned development efforts in new directions. As Kemmis (2009, p. 463) argues action research is 'a more or less systematic, more or less disciplined process that animates and urges change in practices, under-standings and the conditions of practice'. Hence, throughout the project, we remained attentive that 'these methods and approaches are deployed within a participatory framework committed to genuinely democratic and noncoercive forms of research 'with' and 'for', rather than 'on' participants' (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2009).

Fostering change: Incremental steps

The project never wavered from the intention to improve livelihoods of poor rural households by action research, since we had to learn how to conduct this process. Women did not wish to engage in confrontation with their husbands or with their communities. Transformation on the level of the social fabric (women's social capital and in particular gendered relations) was eventually addressed and gradually strategized by the project, facilitated by the learning cycles of the action research methodology. Hence, here we show that instead of aiming at a radical transformation of women's lives, we facilitated the kind of change women desired: gradual incremental steps. Aiming to do no harm it is not empowerment which the project first triggered. As Gilligan (1982) theorised autonomy can follow and not precede the establishment of caring links. Indeed, this appears quite in contrast with traditional visions of empowerment, as for example Fine and Glendinning (2005) put forward, if concepts of autonomy and independence are accepted as universal goals, the concepts of dependency and care are more problematic. For example Riger (1993) criticised that the empowerment concept might be oriented towards masculine visions of individualism, mastery and power. Instead, our project valued empowering the local poor while neither undermining their capital-base nor family or community ties. This stimulated change in harmony with dominant customs, with women navigating within boundaries.

Significance: Implications for development practice

In what ways do our results have meaning and relevance beyond our immediate context (Bradbury Huang, 2010)? This project further demonstrates the strength of

action research in addressing complex challenges, such as poverty alleviation or unequal gender relations. Three aspects, in particular, are important to practitioners and action researchers in development contexts: timescales of interventions, the nature of transformation and social capital.

Timescales of interventions. Many development projects have a short timescale of intervention. They enter a local context and go straight into implementation. In this project, implementation was not attempted until after the completion of four learning cycles. Although this might be seen as a waste of resources by those in favour of a quick fix, developing interventions to alleviate poverty must be appropriate to the needs and context in which they are being developed if they are to have any chance of succeeding. This study demonstrates that interventions that are dealing with complex issues, such as poverty alleviation and unequal gender relations, also require longer timescales. This in contrast with short-term interventions which are not capable of generating the positive spirals at the basis of sustainable change.

Transformation

The project was based on the dissemination of applied knowledge or knowhow – on how to grow vegetables, produce seeds, rear poultry, etc. Although this was 'new' knowhow for the participants, it represented successful traditional techniques identified by the staff and the earlier project participants. However, this knowledge could only be applied after the participants had received training in these techniques. Probably even more important than knowhow of agricultural techniques was the increased knowhow of social interaction among intermediaries and beneficiaries. Women started helping and sharing with each other only after they had gained the 'confidence' to do so, but also the capacity to motivate other women. The intermediaries and beneficiaries often used the word 'inspire' to describe this first step of dissemination. Women's attitudes were transformed: women were more positive, with more strength and more energy. Women claimed that what occurs is a shift from 'having the will' to 'knowing the way', as exemplified by this beneficiary's comment: 'I had the will in mind before but I didn't know the way. Now I have many ways'.

Social capital. During the first learning cycle, we observed two successful women entrepreneurs which helped us to understand that very poor women lack social networks through which they could access resources. Economic vulnerability was as much a problem of social capital as it was economic or physical capital. And we discovered, as others had before us, the negative effects of social capital for women in situations where *purdah* is a social norm (Andrist, 2008). Over seven learning cycles, we saw women determining for themselves the meaning of development and investing time and social capital for instrumental ends, such as feeding their families or sending their children to school. By the end of the project, they portrayed themselves as stronger and more autonomous vis-à-vis

their husbands and other powerholders, such as imams and rich men. Theoretical conceptions of social capital which demonstrate how social capital both simultaneously enables and constraints women, particularly in contexts of *purdah*, played a crucial role in helping the research team to understand the complexity of the local context.

The action research project analysed in this article is inscribed in a long time frame. It proposes a vision of development that is not transformational but made of small incremental changes embedded in the local context. Mayoux (2001), for example has described that micro-finance can exacerbate inequalities due to a failure to examine the norms and traditions of social capital in a particular context. The gradual changes triggered by this project were instead conservative steps accepted by all stakeholders and hence not undermining women's support networks. Therefore, we argue that development is not always 'transformational'; instead, as we show through our empirical study, development interventions should first and foremost ensure that 'no harm' is done.

Development impact

Improvements in women's livelihoods went hand-in-hand with gradual change to gender relations in the household and community in which women's improved access to social networks was a symptomatic part. Although women's livelihoods improved considerably over the project period, demonstrated by the results of the photo-voice exercise, the greatest, most sustainable impact was probably the improvement in women's capabilities to take action and see opportunities in their own environment. Women see opportunities to grow vegetables or cultivate fish but also opportunities to engage into activities as this intermediary explains of a photograph she had taken:

> She is my neighbour and her husband, they are making baskets. He used to make them alone, I have suggested her to help him, because before she used to sit here and there after finishing her household work, now she helps him. I have learnt it from the intermediary that if you give suggestions to others and show the way they can improve. (Rehena, Beneficiary)

The project seems to have started a positive spiral in which women's contribution to the community have been enhanced, and their self-esteem and their social status have been improved; it is this positive spiral which is at the basis of sustainable change. Through their contribution, women said they gain 'satisfaction' and are 'now known'. Women's social status has improved as community members acknowledge their results and this social status facilitates further impact: 'We are more known so people give importance to what we are saying so they develop themselves', said one participant. Women's improved status also contributes to their capacity to innovate with IGAs and, because of their enhanced status, they are able to participate more effectively in the improvement of others. Women's

knowledge is both in demand and demanded by other women. This article shows some of the challenges inherent to women's development: where transformative change is sought for their welfare but where constraints are located within what gives meaning to their lives, namely the social relations in which they are embedded. Social capital's contradictory role is particularly challenging for women as highlighted by Kabeer:

> How then is it possible for women to recognize and deal with the injustices embedded in the social relationships that define their identities and give meaning to their lives without at the same time negating or undermining these relationships? (2011, p. 503)

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the project's 'choicepoints', we conclude that the ILA methodology, and the action research approach more generally, played an important role in enabling poor women and other stakeholders to articulate and develop a development path fit to the local context. Defining characteristics of this process comprise: a clear articulation of objectives in which poverty alleviation always received priority and in which risk for the women was minimised; the development of learning cycles in which women were the central actors of the research-action process; and the fact that the different stakeholders took on the role of main change agent at different times in the process.

The project demonstrates action research's efficacy in addressing complex challenges, such as poverty alleviation or unequal gender relations. Key lessons for development practice include the need to develop interventions over a longer-time frame; the need for a vision of development that is not transformational but made of small incremental changes, embedded in the local context; and the importance and contradictory role of social capital. In terms of development impact, efforts to alleviate women's poverty by improving their livelihoods involved gradual changes to gender relations at the household and community level and improved women's capabilities, both of which have the potential to be a motor for sustainable development. We conclude that these defining characteristics, development impact and lessons for development practice have their roots in the iterative process which kept the main objective of the project, namely poverty alleviation, central throughout.

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Notes

1. For a concise literature review of ILA, see https://idealpractitioner.wordpress.com/ar-journal-articles/or the website of the Athena Institute http://www.falw.vu.nl/en/research/athena-institute/publications/index.aspx
2. The pre-reconnaissance phase was dubbed as such in retrospective, it is a not a stage of the ILA as referred to, but in this particular project where we applied and hence developed further the ILA methodology we could makeuse of such a pre-reconnaisance phase, hereby strengthening our approach.
3. For the photograph, see https://idealpractitioner.wordpress.com/ar-journal-articles/

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Sarah Cummings is a social entrepreneur who combines consultancies with research and publishing. She has worked as a consultant for diverse organisations (multilateral, bilateral, non-governmental, educational) and has experience of developing successful research funding proposals. She is the Editor-in-Chief of the 'Knowledge Management for Development Journal' which she founded with colleagues in 2005. Her research interests focus on information and knowledge, including knowledge co-creation and patterns of academic publishing. She is a writer, researcher, editor and lecturer.

Jeroen Maas has a strategic role at the Amsterdam Economic Board, orchestrating open innovation and business development in the health sector with a focus on the use of (data) technology in supporting health. The challenge presented by the combination of new technology providing us with an unprecedented opportunity to actually work on staying as healthy as possible, and a once-effective health care system in dire need of change, calls for public, academic and private partners to join forces and restructure frameworks and organisation. Fascinated by the complexities of this challenge, Jeroen works with the Amsterdam Economic Boards' leading CEOs, scientists and policymakers to promote innovation with the ultimate aim to gain two healthy years for every inhabitant of the Metropolitan Area Amsterdam. Earlier positions Jeroen held were in the public sector, multinationals, and academia. He received degrees in Biology (MSc), Business Management (MA) and Stimulating Entrepreneurial Behaviour (PhD).

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