The role of local knowledge in sustainable development programmes

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Chapter 7
Action research for incremental transformation: poverty alleviation among rural women in Jessore District, Bangladesh

Abstract

Short-term, linear, project-based approaches to complex problems like women's poverty in rural Bangladesh are often unsuccessful. Taking a different approach, this paper documents the contribution of a transdisciplinary action research methodology to a development project in rural Bangladesh during 2006-2012 in which stakeholders (a local non-governmental organization, poor women, researchers) were able to articulate a development approach for sustainable poverty alleviation. Defining characteristics of this research process involve a 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 the fact that the different stakeholders took on the role of main change agent at different stages in the process. Efforts to alleviate women's poverty by improving their livelihoods led to gradual changes in gender relations at the household and community level and strengthened women's capabilities, simultaneously developing an approach to social entrepreneurship. 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 recognizes the role of social capital.

7.1   Introduction

With some 47 million people living below the poverty line, Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in Asia (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 and Mohiuddin, 2015).

In 2006, PRIDE, a local non-governmental organization (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 et al., 2012). From mappings and interviews with local people, the resource base of poor households was identified: they are landless with, at best, a small garden to grow vegetables or raise a few poultry (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; and 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, 2008)

This description which is consistent with BRAC's definition of poverty (Das and Misha, 2010).

Various researchers from the Athena Institute 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 presence of researchers at different times during the project served a number of purposes: it was possible to consider the project from multiple perspectives but also facilitated the multiple composition of research teams.

7.2   The transdisciplinary action research methodology: ILA

The ILA methodology can be considered a form of transdisciplinary action research and has many similarities to action research and its myriad offshoots and offspring. PRIDE staff had previously used the ILA methodology while working at the Grameen Krishi 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 the monitoring activities, while PRIDE provided some funds from its seed project. Indeed, reciprocal exchange of seeds from PRIDE to the participants was at the basis of this 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. (staff member, 2011)

The ILA approach has supported diverse multi-stakeholder processes aimed at inclusive agricultural, health and biotechnological innovation. It was developed during the 1980s and 1990s by Bunders and Broerse at the Athena Institute, VU University Amsterdam (Broerse, 1998; Bunders, 1990). The ILA approach has been applied in different fields, including in influencing public attitudes to genetically modified crops (see, for example, de Cock Buning et al., 2011), development of neurosciences (see, for example, Arentshorst et al., 2014; Pittens et al., 2014), stigma reduction in leprosy (see, for example, Peters et al., 2015), patient participation in health agenda setting (see, for example, van der Ham et al., 2014; Pittens et al., 2014) and urban waste processes in Europe (see, for example, Broerse et al., 2013). It has also been applied in many countries, including Indonesia (see, for example, Peters et al., 2015), South Africa (Swaans et al., 2009), Bangladesh (Zweekhorst, 2004; Maas, 2013, Maas et al., 2014; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c), Thailand (Sermrittirong et al., 2014) and the Netherlands (see, for example, de Cock Buning et al., 2011; Arentshorst et al., 2014).

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 7.1. 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) (see Figure 7.1). 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 7.2 summarizes 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.

Table 7.1 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	2006-2012	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.

Prior to the project, identified as the 'pre-reconnaissance phase' (see Table 7.1), 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 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. A variety of learning and inquiry methods were deployed. 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.
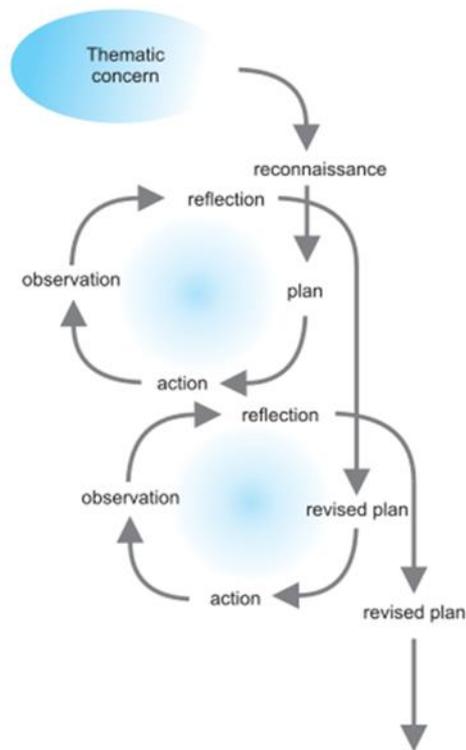
Figure 7.1 Action research spiral (after Kemmis and McTaggert, 1988)

Next, we gained more detailed insights into specific topics which were selected by the community members. For example, from visualization 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 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 grams), these were too large quantities for women to afford. The women needed only 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. Women's activities were assessed using monitoring and evaluation tools, such as drawings made by the women and photo-voice. One challenge 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 as described below.

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 upazilas (sub-districts) and villages.

This article aims to answer the following research question:

> What are the defining characteristics, development impact and lessons from the application of the ILA methodology in a development project in Bangladesh?

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

7.3.1 Cycle 1: June 2006 - May 2007

During the first learning cycle, the project team learnt about the context with community members, learnt about the community and identified community's constraints and opportunities. In 2006, staff and students of the Athena Institute were in Bangladesh for over three months. PRIDE collaborated with local people to make participatory maps of each new village, to assess the needs with community members and to identify the poor households. These maps were drawn by villagers, usually with sticks on the ground, and using local materials.

In this way, PRIDE got to know two women who were already relatively successful compared to other women in their village. These women were already conducting some income generating activities (IGAs) and they were interested to experiment with home-based gardening and backyard poultry rearing to see if these activities would benefit them and others in the community. Since the project was still in an experimental phase and it was unclear whether the women could profit from these IGAs, the women received a very small monthly stipend to protect them from the risk they were taking. These two women were central to this learning cycle. In this phase, PRIDE encouraged the two women to experiment with different activities and with strategies to include more women of their community, making them 'intermediaries' with a number of beneficiaries. For example, the two women experimented with a hole in which they raised fish. This worked rather well, and only a hole of about one metre square was needed. The two women showed this to other women (beneficiaries) in their

village, who also showed interest to dig a fish hole (sometimes with a small group of women, sometimes alone). In this local area, other women showed interest and started to develop these fish holes too. Intermediaries experimented with different activities such as cultivating vegetables on pergolas with seeds from PRIDE. They also experimented with different ways to perform such activities, for example training one woman at a time or in groups; and grouping women in cooperative groups to cultivate a piece of land together so that each could attend to her home duties too. Beneficiaries obtained the inputs for the activities from the intermediaries.

Much detailed information was obtained from the communities and, together with the communities, criteria were gradually identified that were needed to become successful intermediaries, such as being poor, with rudimentary education, and married. These criteria only became explicit in later learning cycles (Cycle 4).

7.3.2 Cycle 2: June 2007 - May 2008

In this cycle, the project included four additional participants (intermediaries), selected during participatory mapping with the communities, who in turn would work with 'beneficiaries' in their respective villages. Consistent with the action research spiral, the project was continuously monitoring, consulting with participants and other stakeholders, undertaking field visits and interviews, and consulting with experts from other fields. During the first learning cycle and with the first two participants, PRIDE had learned what sort of skills were needed for intermediaries who would develop networks of beneficiaries who would benefit from the project. Based on this skill set, they identified potential women with community members. Before approaching the women, their husbands and in-laws were asked for permission to involve them in the project. After this, the women themselves were asked if they would like to take part.

PRIDE trained these four women in the knowledge and skills required to conduct home-based gardening and poultry rearing. These women also received a small monthly allowance to compensate them for the risk they were taking. They were asked to identify other local women interested in starting IGAs who became their beneficiaries. The training, designed to support women in the new IGAs, did not only consist of a flow of knowledge from PRIDE to the participants. Instead, the emphasis was also on knowledge sharing between the women on the challenges they were facing. Women would discuss various topics during the training sessions, such as the exchange of technical knowledge they had developed. For example, one woman taught others how she managed to protect her gourd from pests using an old sari she had wrapped around it. After the training in which both the intermediaries and the beneficiaries were present, the intermediaries and the beneficiaries started to implement the IGAs developed during the first learning cycle. Activities included 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 in tiny 'ponds' (holes). In addition, the intermediaries were extensively monitored by PRIDE staff and the beneficiaries were monitored by intermediaries.
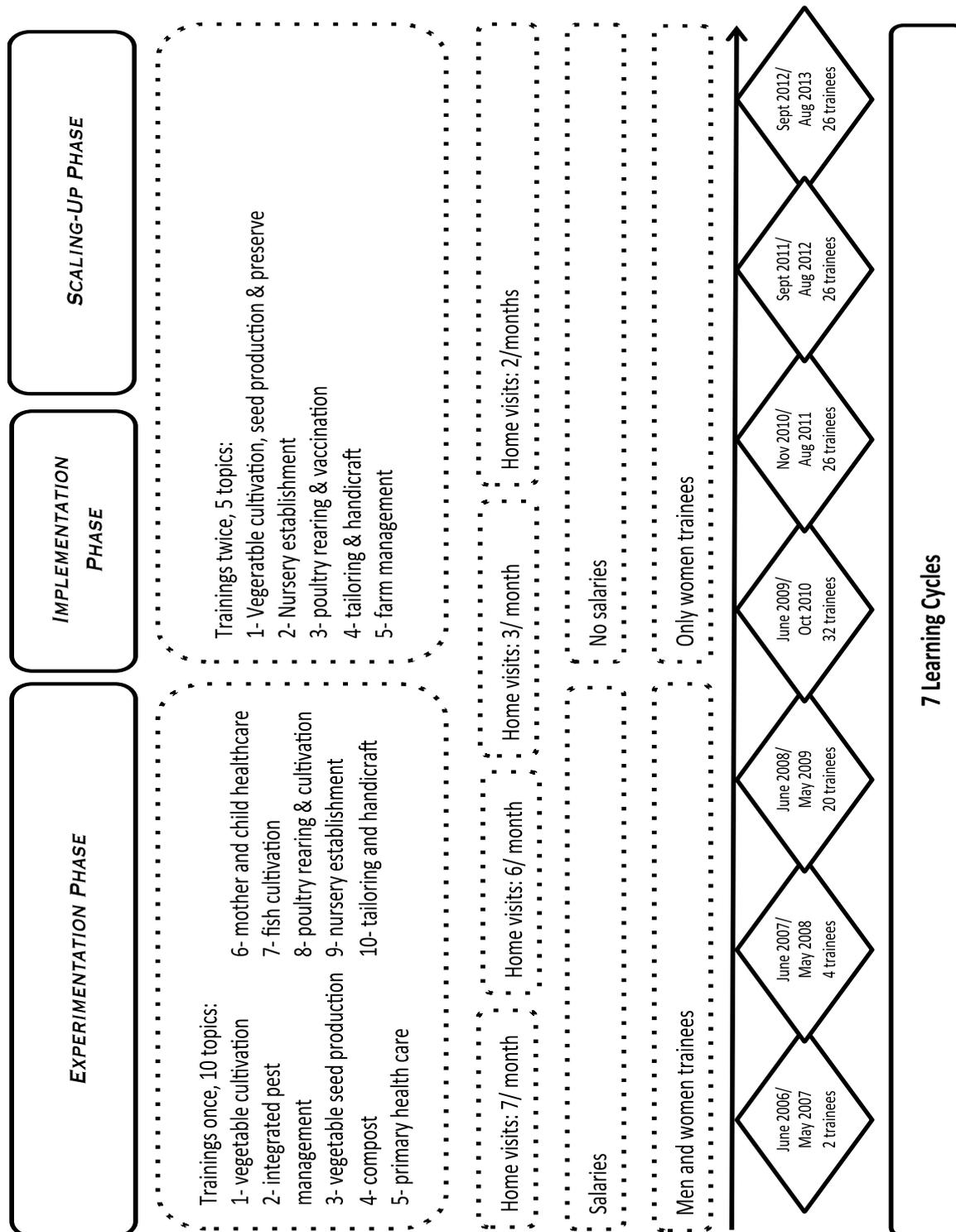
Figure 7.2: Overview of the stages and learning cycles.

At this point in the project process, PRIDE and community members became increasingly aware of the fact 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. This crucial role attributed to social

capital in efforts to reach a sustainable livelihood was supported by the interviews with participants and other poor 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)

Social capital appeared to play a dual role, constraining women's development but also being a source of support. In particular because of the social custom of the *purdah,* women reported that their husbands and in-laws would restrict them 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)

Thus, dominant social customs and norms constrain both women and their families to follow them because of the inherent risk of disconnecting the individual from his/her social network. The *purdah* participates in maintaining social capital and the fear of losing social capital prevents people from infringing such a norm. Thus, women are obliged to manoeuvre within the boundaries of this social custom with women explaining that they work 'just outside the house so it is ok.'

7.3.3 Cycle 3: June 2008 - May 2009

In this learning cycle, a further 20 women, each from a different village, were invited to become involved in the project as intermediaries after participatory mapping activities and discussions with the communities. In addition, five men were also invited to take part but they dropped out because they had other opportunities as day labourers. From then on, the project only included women and being female was added to the selection criteria.

The intermediaries started experimenting with their beneficiaries in different ways, trying to find a better way to perform IGAs. For example, growing vegetables and collecting seeds for planting or developing nurseries for fruit trees. In this way, they developed skills for growing fruit and vegetables, but also providing opportunities for exchanges. For example, intermediaries collected seeds or cultivated small trees for other women. In the previous cycle, intermediaries and beneficiaries were trained together, while in this cycle, PRIDE trained only the intermediaries while the intermediaries 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. In addition, intermediaries were able to monitor and evaluate the IGAs of the beneficiaries. Women's activities remained in the homestead: backyard poultry rearing and vegetable cultivation or handicrafts, with intermediaries moving within their own village to monitor women, or collect handicrafts, for example.

7.3.4 Cycle 4: June 2009 - October 2010

In 2009, the project was extended to another 32 women in 32 new villages. The new women were trained by PRIDE to become intermediaries The Athena Institute visited the project to analyse with participants whether withdrawal of payment to participants could already be done. Deciding that this was feasible, the researchers stimulated the NGO to withdraw payments to trainees. Given the importance of this change of approach, we later considered this transition represented the launch of the 'implementation phase' of the project. Moreover, intermediaries from previous learning cycles were also no longer paid to take part but they still all remained active in the project at this stage, providing proof that the project was yielding sufficient incentives and benefits. In addition, being married or divorced was added to the selection criteria for intermediaries because some women stopped taking part due to family issues and because their husbands did not like them to move around in the village. Some other women left because of health problems. In total, six women (intermediaries) left the project throughout the seven learning cycles.

From ten original topics in the previous learning cycle, PRIDE's training of the intermediaries was condensed to cover 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. During training, women learnt from each other, finding solutions to combat challenges, such as pests attacking their plants and protecting their poultry from predators.

7.3.5 Cycle 5: November 2010 - August 2011

In the fifth learning cycle, the team visited the project and stimulated women to describe how their lives had changed under the project. This was initially done using a questionnaire survey, developed through an iterative process. Every time a questionnaire was administered, it was analysed, learning from this experience, modifying the questionnaire, before administering it to the next participant. In total, the questionnaire was administered 17 times, taking around 4 to 5 hours each. This very time-consuming process was not undertaken to generate statistics. Instead, it was in-depth understanding that was generated which was later used as a base to develop a classical questionnaire to measure change in the scaling-up phase.

In order to identify domains of change from the perspectives of women, the research team chose the participatory photo-voice methodology so that participants could show which changes had been made in their lives. Participants were given disposable cameras by the staff of PRIDE who selected participants, comprising intermediaries and beneficiaries who started in different learning phases. PRIDE staff asked the women to take photos which portray 'changes in their lives' since the NGO entered their village. The NGO staff only showed how to take the first photo, then the women were left on their own in their villages to take their own photographs. Cameras were collected two weeks later by PRIDE. Women were then invited in groups to discuss their photos. During these discussions women were proudly describing the photographs they had taken. Some took pictures of their vegetables, demonstrating how they had been given the opportunity to grow vegetables and collect seeds. Indeed, one of the first skills developed through the project was women's ability to identify

opportunity of available land to grow vegetables as is demonstrated by photograph 7.1 and associated description by a beneficiary:

> 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 (a sort of radish) plant that I am now growing in that narrow space between the ponds. (Mukta, beneficiary)

Photograph 7.1 The space between ponds for growing vegetables.

Photographs also demonstrated women's approach to IGAs, showing how some beneficiaries had decided to train other women in groups, in the same way that they had been trained, representing beneficiaries of beneficiaries as demonstrated by photograph 7.2.

> 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 emphasized their involvement with others, and how the project had given them the opportunity to enhance their relationships. Intermediaries and beneficiaries showed photos of themselves helping other women in their fields. Women also showed photographs of themselves with the vegetables they were able to give other women. However, when women started describing the process – and care was taken not to direct interviews in any way, only focusing on 'change' - it became clear that women were 'framing' these exchanges as 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 wider change in her village by staging before and after photos: children washing in a pond only with water

versus now 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 as can be seen in Photograph 7.3 and is illustrated by the associated quote.


Photograph 7.2 A group of women being helped by a beneficiary

Photograph 7.3 A woman giving money to her husband.

> 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)

Another woman staged a photograph (photograph 7.4) in which her whole family could be seen discussing the education of her daughter as she explains in the associated quote. This represented change because, before the advent of the project, the daughter was not able to go to school.
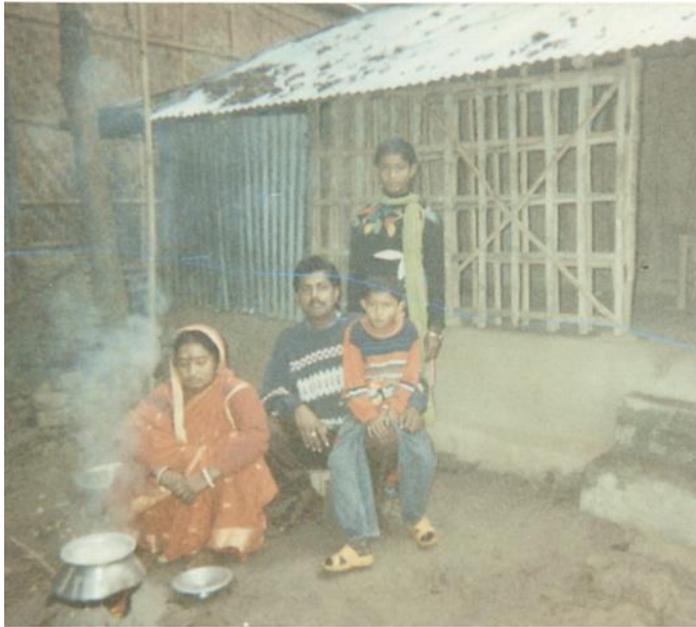
Photograph 7.4 A family photograph

>Anamika (beneficiary): '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.'

>Researcher: 'Is it a family picture?'

>Anamika: '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.'

Similarly, another beneficiary showed through a picture (photograph 7.5) that she is now able to send her daughter to school.

>I am 23 years old, a Muslim. I am married for 8 years now, but my husband died 10 months ago. I have one son, he is 2 years old, and a daughter who is 7 years old. I went to school up to class 8 so I can read and write. I started as a beneficiary 1 year ago (…) In this photo, I am sending my daughter to school. Because as a beneficiary I can earn money, I can buy books and clothes so it is easier to send my daughter to school. (Salima, beneficiary)

Photograph 7.5 A girl with her school books.

Some intermediaries also gave advice to others on health, not just on IGAs as explained in the following quote and illustrated by photograph 7.6.

> I am 30 years old, and a Muslim. I am married, my husband is employed in a farm. He has completed his Secondary School Certificate. I have one son, he is 7 years old, and he reads in class 1. I have one daughter, she is 15 years old, and she reads in class 9. My father-in-law also lives in our house. I have been an intermediary for 1½ years, I have 70 beneficiaries (…) This is the picture of a child. He was very sick before (…) After the mother (a beneficiary) got suggestions from me, he is now healthy. (Sherina, intermediary)

Photograph 7.6 The healthy son of a beneficiary.

Table 7.2 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 (for example 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 population have a government job contract	Organizing skills (for example: 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 2nd grade.	Fit and active (many poor are sick and unable to work).

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 as demonstrated in the following quote:

> 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.

7.3.6. Cycles 6-7: September 2011 - August 2012 and September 2012 - August 2013

During the final stages, lessons learnt were articulated and implemented, facilitated by the team. From this time onwards, the project explicitly aimed to stimulate social entrepreneurship (Maas, 2013; Maas et al., 2014; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c), representing the launch of the 'scaling-up phase'. For example, criteria for selecting villages but also for identifying women which had been developed during the different learning cycles became explicit and applied systematically (Table 7.2).

As shown in Table 7.2, the candidates for social entrepreneurship needed to be married, divorced or widowed; to be able to write, have good networking, communication, organizational 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: young, unmarried or recently married women would be less able to move around the village, facing disapproval from their families or communities. 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.

7.4   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: 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.

7.4.1 Articulation of objectives

The articulation of objectives relates to the extent to which the authors explicitly address objectives relevant to their work and the choices they have made in meeting them (Bradbury Huang, 2010). This project had two main objectives: poverty alleviation of poor households and sustainable development. In this project, the main objective of the project, namely poverty alleviation, was agreed between PRIDE and the Athena Institute because this is a pressing need in the region under study. The project never wavered from the intention to improve livelihoods of poor rural households but how this was to be done was kept radically open for many years. Local people themselves identified food shortages as their most serious problem, leading the project to decide on backyard gardening and poultry rearing as potential activities. Although changes to gender relations were made during the project, these were not a main objective. Women became the focus of the project when men pulled out – men had other opportunities as day labourers – and changes to gender relations happened gradually as women started growing vegetables, rearing poultry and interacting with and learning from each other.

A further underlying objective which was not explicitly articulated was a recognition that the people in the project were very poor and that they should not be subject to additional risk when taking part in the experimentation of the project. To protect women from risk, the earliest participants received a small allowance.

7.4.2 Working with practitioners in a participatory mode

During learning cycles, intermediaries and their beneficiaries were the central actors of the research-action process, together developing IGAs. Women decided that IGAs should take place inside or very near to home so as not to undermine taking care of the family. New unplanned, unforeseen, and unimagined IGAs emerged through praxis. For example, intermediaries became 'middlemen' in the sale of handicrafts made by beneficiaries, and began vaccinating women's poultry for a small fee.

At the beginning of each learning cycle, PRIDE led the assessment of the previous cycle and revised its plan of action for the next learning cycle. Moreover, these plans were discussed with the research team who sometimes "imposed" ideas in the long-term interest of the local poor. Also, not all knowledge and know-how was emergent, some was transferred from one village to another and, consequently, some top-down teaching was also necessary. However, the most important part of the training was to train intermediaries in a participatory manner to develop innovations for generating income. As the research team had trained PRIDE staff in participatory strategies nearly two decades ago (Zweekhorst, 2004), women were stimulated to co-create solutions for escaping poverty.

Although the NGO stimulated the intermediaries (and their beneficiaries) to engage in learning loops, details of these were not accessible directly to the research team; most details were only transmitted to the researchers via stories recalling project processes and learning loops. In terms of research data, the research team sometimes also used some classical data collection methods. In 2008, a classical sociological study was performed with in-depth interviews to give deeper understanding of the project. During 2010-2012, questionnaires were employed to

measure change. However, developing the questionnaire was a time-intensive process because the project faced difficulties in capturing field realities. The photo-voice exercise represented a successful effort at participatory evaluation because it generated photographs which project participants and researchers could share to discuss and evaluate the project. The participatory visualization techniques were also successful tools, used by the researchers with PRIDE and community members at the start of the project and later routinely used by PRIDE with the community members to identify households to be included in the project, as well local constraints and opportunities. The research team provided support to the NGO, the NGO supported the intermediaries while the intermediaries supported beneficiaries.

7.4.3   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: 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. In terms of methods in particular, although many different methods were employed during the lifetime of the project, 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: 1391). 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 symbolize 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 visualization which also facilitated discussions with local people.

7.4.4   Reflexivity and actionability

Reflexivity comprises the extent to which actors explicitly locate themselves as change agents while actionability comprises the extent to which the project provides new ideas that guide action (Bradbury Huang, 2010). The role of change agent, namely who was most influential, most in control, most in charge of women's activities, shifted during the seven learning cycles. PRIDE staff, members of the research team and intermediaries all, at different times, were the

leaders and primary decision makers. However, in general, PRIDE staff were in charge of the seven learning cycles. In part, therefore, our research is a story about how university-bound, foreign action researchers can help shift planned development efforts in new directions. There were times when we were insistent. For example, one complex challenge was to convince the NGO staff after the third learning cycle that the women could stand on their own feet, and did not need to be paid by the project. We, in fact, insisted on the withdrawal of payments, putting collaborative decision making aside and asking the NGO staff to try to do this. Taking the risk, the NGO staff found that the new approach worked: new women still wanted to join the project and the original women did not leave.

The research team sometimes struggled with dealing with an emergent, unpredictable, unplannable process. During AS' first stay in Bangladesh, she wrote about communication between researchers on a moving project: 'It is always difficult to write things in such a way that the other understands your thoughts...' We faced a particular challenge in having to accept that we could not grasp the complete picture and had no control over the emergent project. The challenge was addressed by working with a psychologist to engage in intensive reflection, 'uncomfortable reflexivity' in the words of Pillow (2003: 193) on the implications of working within such constraints. Pushing ourselves to stick with ILA and a commitment to emergent processes and emergent methodology was rewarded often enough to give us reasons to keep going.

7.4.5 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.

7.4.5.1 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.

7.4.5.2 Transformation
The project was based on the dissemination of applied knowledge or know-how – on how to grow vegetables, produce seeds, rear poultry etc. Although this was 'new' know-how 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

know-how of agricultural techniques was the increased know-how 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.'

7.4.5.3 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.

7.4.6   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: 503)

7.5   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 (Bradbury Huang, 2010). 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 minimized; 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.