

**THE IMPACT OF THE LOCAL INITIATIVES PROGRAM ON
FAMILY WELFARE ASSISTANTS:
PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

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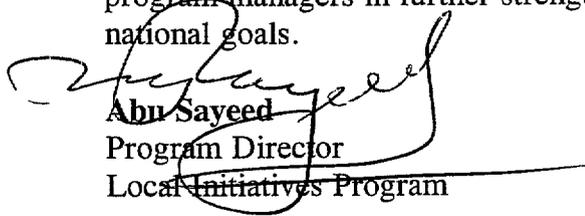
FOREWORD

I am pleased to release this study of the impact of the Local Initiatives Program (LIP) on the perceptions of Family Welfare Assistants of their role and responsibilities in the local level service delivery system of the Bangladesh Government's family planning program.

Since 1987, Family Planning Management Development project has been collaborating with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of Bangladesh Government in implementing the LIP with financial assistance from the United States Agency for International Development. The aim of LIP is to improve the management of the family planning program at the local level and to support Government's efforts to offer decentralized, high-quality and sustainable family planning services.

This report is part of a series of LIP studies. The first, a focus group study, was undertaken in 1994 with 72 district and thana/union level managers working in the LIP. The objective of the study was to assess the views of the LIP thana team members about the effectiveness of the LIP approach as well as the role of the community members, especially the female volunteers and governmental family planning workers, in strengthening program activities. The second study was a household micro-survey to assess the impact of LIP on access to, coverage by and acceptance of family planning in the national family planning program in Bangladesh. The third study was again a focus group study, undertaken in 1994-1995 with volunteers from 10 unions to elicit their perception about their role in the Government's family planning and maternal child health program, and to examine the impact of their participation in the LIP on their personal/family situation and their social status. Examining the volunteers' attitudes towards their continued future involvement in the LIP was also one of the objectives of that study. The present study was undertaken to examine the impact of LIP interventions on the knowledge, skills and activities of the grassroots level, paid service providers--the Family Welfare Assistants (FWA).

The study has revealed some interesting findings on the impact of LIP interventions on the perceptions of the FWAs with respect to their roles and responsibilities as the grassroots level family planning workers. I hope these findings will be useful to the policy-makers and the program managers in further strengthening program activities towards the end of achieving the national goals.


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1987, the Local Initiatives Program has assisted the Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to improve the management of the family planning program at the local level and support the Bangladesh Government's (BDG) efforts to offer decentralized, high-quality and sustainable family planning services.

A very large BDG work force comprised of Family Welfare Assistants (FWA), Family Welfare Visitors (FWV) and Family Planning Inspectors (FPI) provides family planning and maternal and child health (MCH) services at the grassroots level. These community-based service providers are traditionally concerned with providing family planning and reproductive health services to eligible couples. With the introduction of Local Initiatives Program (LIP) interventions, the roles of these service providers, particularly FWAs, have undergone a change and they have assumed a broader role in program management.

This study was conducted to assess the impact of LIP on the role and responsibilities of the FWAs. The FWAs working in the LIP unions of 30 selected thanas attended workshops in January and April, 1995. The 553 FWAs who attended these workshops completed a self-administered, written questionnaire to determine their perceptions of their role and responsibilities and to determine their grasp of the management tasks for which they are responsible and for which they have been trained by LIP.

The study findings indicate that about 94 percent of the participating FWAs had been in their current posts for four or more years and more than 50 percent have worked as FWAs from nine to eighteen years. About 25 percent of the respondents had received basic training since the inclusion of their unions within the LIP. Sixty-four and 27 percent, respectively, also attended some other kinds of training courses organized by the LIP or by government during that same period.

A range of variation was observed in how the FWAs define eligible couples (ELCO), the main target of their work, suggesting a possible need for target group clarification. More than 90 percent of all respondents indicated that, as a result of LIP interventions, their skills in four specific management areas-- planning, supervision/monitoring, data analysis and reporting -- had improved moderately to significantly since the involvement of LIP in their unions.

Fifteen percent of the respondents had worked with volunteers prior to the introduction of LIP. A majority of the respondents indicated a common set of activities that they carry out when they meet with the volunteers. These include reviewing activities of the previous month and planning for the next month, updating ELCO registers and maps, updating FWA registers, and

discussing problems and issues raised by the volunteers. More than 93 percent of FWAs contact their volunteers at least once a month apart from monthly coordination meetings. Many of the same tasks as noted above are covered in these incidental meetings.

The survey also revealed specifics about how FWAs do their work and what they feel about their improved management skills. For example, they were asked about how often they meet formally and informally with volunteers and what transpires in those meetings. About ninety percent of the FWAs indicated that volunteers come to them for assistance as needed--a sign of very good supervisor-supervisee relationship. Responses to questions about the FWAs' relationships with the Family Welfare Visitors also indicate a good relationship with these clinical service providers upon whom the FWAs depend for the provision of clinical methods to referred clients.

Other questions were related to their record keeping and reporting responsibilities and the understanding and use of their client registers. Their responses revealed a good grasp of data regarding the ELCOs in their catchment areas, how many had dropped out, and the reasons for these dropouts.

More than 90 percent reported involvement in the organization and implementation of satellite clinics in their areas. Most also reported regular attendance at the meetings of the union level community family planning committees as well as organizing meetings of the unit family planning committees in their own units. Comments about the agendas of these meetings organized by FWAs indicate a good grasp of the roles and responsibilities of these committees and the role of the FWA in relation to them. Nearly all indicated the importance of the community's cooperation and assistance in their improved performance under the LIP.

I. BACKGROUND

Since 1987, the Local Initiatives Program (LIP) has collaborated with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) to improve the management of the family planning program at the local level and support the Bangladesh Government's (BDG) efforts to offer decentralized, high-quality and sustainable family planning (FP) services.

The key program interventions by LIP are: 1) training and retraining of government FP staff, volunteers, and community leaders, 2) continuous monitoring of performance, 3) technical assistance, 4) involvement of community volunteers, and 5) Action Plan development. Through this integrated program of community mobilization and supporting BDG staff and volunteers, more than 28,000 volunteers were working in 501 unions to provide services to more than 1.8 million eligible couples (ELCO) as of April, 1995, when the data reported in this study¹ were collected.

Each volunteer visits an average of 63 eligible couples (ELCO) living in close proximity to her home on a monthly basis. The ELCOs are often relatives and close friends of the volunteer which plays a key role in determining the rate of acceptance and continuity of family planning services. Active participation of the volunteers allows Family Welfare Assistants (FWA) and Family Welfare Visitors (FWV), the paid BDG service providers, to concentrate more on attending to special client needs, providing training and technical assistance as well as on direct service delivery.

LIP's program initiatives focus on providing management support to the BDG's family planning program through technical assistance and training of government workers and volunteers and overall program monitoring. The primary clients of the program are the government workers providing family planning services. The secondary clients are community leaders. The primary beneficiaries are acceptor couples. The target market is eligible couples.

II. HISTORY OF THE LOCAL INITIATIVES PROGRAM

The LIP, formerly called the Upazila Initiatives Project, is a management training and development project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Family Planning Management Development (FPMD) project of Management Sciences for Health (MSH). The project goal is to support the efforts of the Bangladesh Government to provide high-quality, locally-managed, sustainable family planning services to a greater number of eligible couples. The LIP does this by improving the

management skills of the grassroots family planning staff and local leaders so that they can plan and manage their family planning services and activities more efficiently and effectively. The project, which began in 1987, strives to increase the involvement of communities in the National Family Planning Program and to make them responsible for program implementation.

Four approaches are used by the project to achieve its goal:

- * LIP demonstrates the project's strategy through sponsoring study tours by teams of local level leaders and family planning staff to visit successful programs in other areas. (These teams initially visited Indonesia, but they now visit other successful, long-running LIP project areas within Bangladesh.)
- * LIP staff guide each team through the process of developing and implementing an action plan for its own community and limited financial grants are provided for plan implementation
- * LIP assists the team in promoting a successful partnership between local government officials, family planning staff and the community
- * Local women serve the program as community volunteers providing information and services, which include supply of pills and condoms and referral for clinical FP and MCH services, directly to ELCOs. They also assist in the implementation of satellite clinics

By April 1995, when data for this study were collected in the second workshop, LIP was covering 501 unions in 88 thanas throughout Bangladesh. (A thana is roughly equivalent to a U.S. county). These project areas covered a population of approximately 10.2 million with about 1.8 million ELCOs and the community volunteers affiliated with LIP numbered 28,441.

III. RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

An external evaluation undertaken in the mid-1994 of FPMD's activities in Bangladesh recommended that LIP undertake an assessment of the impact of LIP on the local service providers in the Bangladesh Government's FP program. A survey of the lowest level family planning workers, FWAs, all of whom are women, was suggested. This recommendation was based on LIP claims that it had enhanced the status of this group of workers by changing their role from household distributor to supervisor through the introduction of a cadre of female village volunteers who have taken over distribution tasks. More importantly, LIP also claimed that it had enhanced these FWAs' skills in planning, supervision/monitoring, data analysis and

reporting techniques through organizing various training and workshops with their participation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

With a primary focus on augmenting their technical and managerial skills, LIP organized a series of two-day workshops for the field level service providers and their immediate supervisors (FWAs, FWVs and FPIs) of selected LIP thanas. Forty thanas qualified for participation in these workshops by having shown good program performance and a CAR of above 60 percent as well as having joined the project prior to December 31, 1993. In January 1995, participants from 12 thanas attended the first of three workshops. Similar workshops were organized in April 1995 and in September 1995 for the FWAs, FWVs and FPIs from the remaining 28 thanas--18 and 10 LIP thanas participated in these workshops, respectively.

A total of 553 FWAs from 30 thanas who attended the January and April 1995 workshops completed self-administered written questionnaires to determine their perceptions of the changes in their roles and responsibilities and to determine their capabilities regarding management tasks for which they are responsible and for which they have been trained by LIP. A copy of the Questionnaire is provided in Annex A.

V. FINDINGS

A. Length of Services and Training Background of FWAs

The study findings indicate that about 94 percent of the participating FWAs have been in their current posts for four or more years. Of these, more than 50 percent have been working in their positions for a period of nine to eighteen years.

Foundation or basic training is mandatory for all FWAs and is immediately followed by their appointment to government service. All the FWAs who are now working in the LIP areas have received basic training through the government's regular training programs. In addition to the basic training, FWAs also receive refresher and specialized training in different subjects. This study examined the additional training these FWAs received after the introduction of LIP in their areas because LIP claims that it has increased the knowledge and skill level of FWAs in its project areas by ensuring the participation of these service providers in various training opportunities. All 553 FWAs reported having received some additional training organized by the government or by LIP since their unions (subdivision of a thana) joined LIP. A small number (less than 10 percent) also reported they had received training from NGOs.

B. Definition of ELCOs

A range of variation was observed in how the FWAs defined eligible couples (ELCO) or the target population for their FP/MCH efforts as noted in Table 1.

Table 1 Definitions of ELCOs selected by FWAs

DEFINITION	NUMBER (Percent)
All married couples with a wife between 15 and 45 years of age	268 (49)
All married couples with a wife between 15 and 49 years of age	154 (28)
All married couples with a wife who is still fertile	72 (13)
All currently married women of 49 years of age or less	49 (9)
All sexually active married couples, regardless of age	7 (1)
Other	3 (<1)
TOTAL	553 (100)

Most (more than three-quarters) defined ELCOs either as all married couples with a wife between 15 and 45 years of age or all married couples with a wife between 15 and 49 years of age. However, there does not appear to be agreement about these definitions--perhaps because these workers are not taught a specific definition. It is possible that the FWAs use their own means to determine eligibility (e.g. probing questions) rather than strict definitions containing age indicators. It is widely acknowledged that many Bangladeshis do not know their actual age so that relying on definitions which include an age is not always useful.

C. Impact of LIP on Management Skills of FWAs

LIP claims to have enhanced the status of FWAs by changing their role from household distributor to supervisor through the introduction of a cadre of female village volunteers who have taken over the distribution tasks. More importantly, LIP also claims that it has enhanced the management skills of these FWAs by providing training for them in the areas of planning, supervision and monitoring, data analysis and reporting techniques.