



A Practitioner's Guide to Localized Research: Community-Based Ethnography for Resilience Outcomes

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

04	Introduction
08	LEARNING MOMENT 1 The Seven Guiding Principles of CBE
11	LEARNING MOMENT 2 Looking For and Looking Where
14	LEARNING MOMENT 3 The Community Context
16	LEARNING MOMENT 4 The CBE Team in the Community
20	LEARNING MOMENT 5 First Order Analysis—Social Actors, the Social Landscape, and Testimonies of Change
21	LEARNING MOMENT 6 Second Order Analysis—Patterns of Change by “Bucket”
24	LEARNING MOMENT 7 Third Order Analysis—Resilience
25	LEARNING APPLICATION 1 CBE as Tool for Assessing Project—Related Change
25	LEARNING APPLICATION 2 CBE Application for Localized Programming
26	Limitations of CBE
26	Conclusions

INTRODUCTION

This is a guidebook that introduces an innovative tool for development practice called *Community-Based Ethnography* (CBE). It is intended to (a) describe a robust, innovative qualitative option for assessing the process of change at multiple points in a project cycle (from the design phase of a project, through implementation of project interventions, and as evidentiary documentation of change), and (b) provide an approach that generates localized community ownership of the development process.

The use of Information in the development project

The success of any development project depends on good ideas and good information. We understand **development** to be the process of intended change through planned actions that increase the well-being of a population in time and space. Nations invest around \$160 billion dollars annually toward this well-being goal (OECD 2020). Although allocation of these resources can follow many diverse pathways, it is always goal-oriented and driven by an underlying logic of cause and effect presented in a **theory of change**. As the foundation

of any development project, the theory of change lays out the rationality of “how things work.” There are multiple assumptions that make up this reasoning about human behavior (and the process of change), and such assumptions are based upon different theories of economic or social change and upon the empirical feedback from past and ongoing projects. In this way the effectiveness of development programming and projects is inevitably tied to the quality of the **ideas** and **information** that underlie the development project.

CBE gathers and analyzes useful information

We present Community-Based Ethnography (CBE) as a method for gathering “focused” information used in development programming and evaluation. CBE is a qualitative approach designed to achieve two interrelated goals. It first sheds light on the dynamics of social and behavioral change in communities where development projects are undertaken; second, it mobilizes communities around localized problem-solving and enables effective participation in development programming. Inspired by the time-tested anthropological approach known as “ethnography,” CBE differs from most qualitative methods used in development in several significant ways. It requires strong interaction and participation with community members in their daily activities (not just a focus group meeting); and it “embeds” the CBE team in the community for at least two weeks. These components of CBE refashion the role of the “researcher/data collector” in development practice. In traditional development research, data gathering and analysis are separate activities, often performed by different team members at different times. In CBE, the gathering and analyzing of critical information are integrated, continuous,

iterative, and immediate. The field research team is constantly “processing” and actively evaluating what is heard and seen during the fieldwork experience.

Most development projects employ a standard, routine, set of methods for information collection and analysis. Influenced in part by the dominant role of economic theory and method in development, these methods tend to emphasize quantitative approaches based on large-sample, statistically valid surveys of key indicators at two or more points in time. The impacts of a specific project intervention are also measured using rigorous quantitative research designs (e.g., impact evaluations). While quantitative approaches effectively document important types of change in human behavior and well-being by comparing relevant indicators over time or space, they are limited in achieving an in-depth understanding of how change occurs in the flow of everyday life. Especially when the changes can take years and decades to manifest, such as those that involve values, norms, aspirations, and motivations, qualitative methods are often more effective.

It is common that baseline, midterm, and endline assessments employ a “mixed methods” approach with quantitative and qualitative field teams. The qualitative component, however, usually plays a secondary role in terms of resources and prominence. The resource requirements of the quantitative survey often constrain the design of the qualitative fieldwork in the time devoted to training the research team and the time available in each community. Typically, the qualitative team is limited to a couple of focus group discussions in each community, and several communities are visited each day. The data

are usually collected by local third-party firms, whose participation ends once the data set is compiled and delivered. In contrast, the quality of CBE research is critically dependent upon the skill set of the field team, and the actual design of the research, including the fieldwork, data management, and analysis components, is co-produced by the entire team. Thus, the training of the research team is an extended, iterative process, which involves much more than understanding the research “tools” and knowing “how to talk to people.” Some characteristic differences of CBE are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Defining differences of CBE from traditional qualitative methods.

Research Component	Traditional Qualitative	CBE
Training of field team	3–5 days	More than one month
Methods	FGDs and KII	Social mapping, purposive conversation, focused observation, informal group meetings, participant observation
Time in community	Hours	Days
Role of field team	Data collectors	Integrated in the complete research process
Participation in analysis	None	Complete



Why CBE?

CBE adapts traditional ethnographic methods to the specific contexts and constraints of development practice. It is both a learning tool and a mobilization strategy for community participation and ownership. At its core, the CBE team builds trust and rapport within

the community, interacts with community members in multiple settings, and documents the complexity of social interaction from multiple perspectives. CBE is a highly **flexible** approach and can be employed at all stages of the project cycle. Specifically, CBE is used to:

1. **Understand the role of power relationships in a community.** In any community, there are those with power and influence and those without. The exercise of power is manifest in access to resources (e.g., land and fishing rights) and to the expression of voice (e.g., participation in community decisions). Development projects often use criteria such as gender, occupation, asset indices, and participatory wealth rankings to identify categories of the poor and extreme poor, but CBE is equipped to understand how power relationships generate and maintain these groups.
2. **Document long-term change in social values, norms, and behavioral practices related to the NGO presence.** Social values and norms are deeply engrained in the behavioral practices that characterize any community. For example, in Bangladesh, NGOs have long labored to change the social values that impede advances in well-being and fulfillment for women and excluded groups. The CBE approach is designed to document changes in these social values and norms and the impacts on development goals.
3. **Relate long-term change in resilience capacity as manifest in risk management strategies.** The CBE approach shows how changes in power relationships enhance the ability of households and communities to manage shocks and stresses in high-risk environments. It analyzes how improvements in agency and voice for women and excluded groups expand resilience capacities.
4. **Create a community partnership for program design and implementation.** The focus in CBE on creating trust and rapport creates the opportunity to mobilize community participation in the programming of development projects. In this way, the CBE approach is a localization strategy for community ownership of the project at all stages of the project cycle.

The specific component of CBE presented in this guidebook are based on a pilot application in North and Northeast Bangladesh in communities located in the highly vulnerable haor and char regions. These regions are characterized by exposure to (often severe) annual flooding events, to extreme storms, and to the widespread riverbank erosion of valuable croplands. These forces of nature are highly disruptive of local livelihoods. Besides their high vulnerability and rates of poverty, these communities adhere to traditional social

values and practices that concentrate power in the hands of the local patriarchal elite and constrain both mobility and opportunity for certain residents such as women and the excluded poor. Over the last two decades or more, NGOs have worked in these communities to promote change in economic status and access to opportunity for women and traditionally excluded groups. CBE has used this experience from Bangladesh to demonstrate the usefulness and flexibility of the approach.

Organization of this Guidebook

This guidebook is a learning tool for NGO staff and other practitioners who could adopt the CBE approach. It lays out a sequence of “learning moments” that begins with a set of propositions about the nature of a community and the role of the researcher, then describes the major moments of the CBE implementation, and finally proposes how CBE contributes to development programming.

The **first learning** presents the guiding principles of CBE (what makes CBE unique and powerful).

The **second learning moment** is a discussion of the context of a community and how it is integrated into socio-ecological, political, and historical realities that condition day-to-day reality. Here, the referenced communities are from the highly vulnerable regions of North and Northeast Bangladesh. Understanding the nature of these communities helps identify the research skills necessary to conduct a successful CBE.

The **third learning moment** is how to conduct a successful co-creation design process and identify the actual field skills used to understand the community.

The **fourth learning moment** describes the step-by-step CBE implementation during fieldwork in the community.

The **fifth, sixth, and seventh learning moments** focus on the process of data recording, data management, analysis, and presentation. The last two sections (eighth and ninth) are **learning applications**, which propose how CBE can be used by development practitioners, and the last section addresses the limitations of the approach.



LEARNING MOMENT 1

The Seven Guiding Principles of CBE

The first learning moment introduces the guiding principles that define the CBE approach. The unit of analysis of CBE is the **community**, a social unit comprised of residents who *share a common space and interact with one another according to socially sanctioned rules that govern acceptable and appropriate behavior*. These rules often reflect deeply engrained status factors such as wealth, class, caste, race, ethnicity, gender and age. Not everyone can interact with everyone else in the same way, and in many communities, certain types of residents are systematically excluded due to disability or gender orientation. In order to **know** the community, the development practitioner, as an external actor, must learn what these rules are and how they are evidenced in everyday social interaction. The guiding principles can be thought of as the roadmap for knowing a community.

GP 1: A Community is made up of a multiplicity of voices.

In development practice, it is common to hear people speak of the community as if it were a homogeneous unit with a uniform voice and a common vision. Such is not the case. Each member of a community, individual or household, man or woman, occupies a specific social “space” in the community that is deeply tied to a person’s social identity. The markers of social identity are multiple: gender, caste, livelihood, age, wealth status,

etc.¹ From the CBE perspective, these **social actors** (e.g., shopkeeper, fisherman, landowner, traditional healer) make up the fabric of the community, or as we call it, the **social landscape**. Each social actor experiences the local reality in a different way because of individual identity markers; thus, the social landscape is made up of multiple voices. The focus of CBE is not the internal sameness of a community but the internal differences.

GP 2: Power is distributed unequally in a community.

If a community is made up of multiple voices, NGO workers have long recognized that some voices have more influence and power than others. And some voices are excluded altogether. This has long been a challenge to development practitioners, who often seek to target the less privileged, less powerful, and the excluded in their programming. This CBE guiding principle asserts that not only is it necessary to describe the landscape of social actors (**GP 1 above**), but it is equally important to understand the forms of social interaction among them.

It is in the routine patterns of social interaction that the exercise of differential power is conducted. How does the landless laborer interact with the landowner, or men and women in a household, or lower caste with higher caste? The CBE researcher relies on informal interviews, participatory tools, life histories, and observation to document the acceptable rules of interaction among social actors...and to understand the historical roots of how this power is exercised.

¹ It must be recognized also that there are markers which may make certain residents “invisible,” such as gender orientation or disabled status. Nonetheless, these are also social actors.

GP 3: Change is a “constant” in a community.

It might seem contradictory to say that change is a constant, that is, always occurring, but strong philosophical foundations support this guiding principle. As any development practitioner recognizes, change is mostly a function of a community’s adaptation to external stimuli. Some change is relatively rapid—the adoption of cell phone technology, the emergence of savings and loan groups, the introduction of high-yielding rice systems—and often explained in terms of a new technology, infrastructure investment, and financial availability. In places like Bangladesh, rapid change is also a factor of environmental dynamics and

extreme climatic events. Change in power relationships and social interaction, however, is less responsive to immediate external stimuli, and progresses at a much slower rate—almost snail-like. CBE is designed to look for evidence of change in these more resistant rules that govern interaction among social actors and to determine how such change occurs. In rural Bangladesh, a strong catalyst of change has been the NGO community, both international and local. CBE focuses on how NGOs and other external “change agents,” can influence change in one direction or another.

GP 4: “Looking for” is also a continuous fieldwork experience.

“**Looking for**” is fundamental to the CBE approach and the first task prior to fieldwork. It is the conceptual framework that makes sense of the local reality. Every day, every minute in the community, the CBE team is looking for something—for example, the multiple voices, the rules of social interaction, the exercise of power, and evidence of change that characterizes the community. In academic circles, this looking for is often called the research problem or question, and it organizes how the CBE team assembles all the sights and sounds of fieldwork. In many qualitative research approaches, the researcher in the community “turns on” the data gathering mindset during the focus group discussion or key informant interview, then “turns off” after the activity is finished. In contrast, the CBE team begins data gathering the minute it enters the community and never

turns off. Every observation, every informal discussion is a “looking for” experience. Valuable and relevant information comes from multiple sources—observation of community life, informal conversations with everyone who occupies a social space in the community, that is the range of social actors who make up the social landscape. Related to this guiding principle is the concept of **triangulation**: what the CBE team hears in conversations and interviews and what it observes as behavior both contribute to the growing understanding of the community. When what is said differs significantly from what is seen, the inconsistency must be reconciled. Thus, not only is data gathering a continuous activity, but the data are immediately being processed. Knowing and learning in CBE is not a stepwise experience, it is rather an emergent, dynamic process.

GP 5: The CBE researcher is also a “social actor” in the community.

Due to the extended time in the community, the CBE researcher becomes a social actor in the social landscape, not just a short-term visitor with a lot of questions. Like any other social actor, the researcher brings a particular position, fashioned by training, individual experience, and world view. This **positionality** of the research means that wittingly or unwittingly, the observations and interview outcomes, including the expressed words of others, are filtered through the researcher’s beliefs, history, political stance, and cultural background. Positionality is the recognition that the

researcher’s presence can influence the participants and their responses, while also subjecting any interpretation of the relevant observations to researcher bias. To optimize objectivity, it becomes exceedingly important to establish trust with participants in ways that lessen the impact on research. At a bare minimum, positionality forces the researcher to be mindful of his or her influence on the research process and to rely upon attentive observation and continuous reflection in the pursuit of a faithful local interpretation.

GP 6: CBE generates the community “story.”

As more and more information flows in from observation, conversation, interview, and participation, it is necessary to make sense of it all. This might be called the “story” of the community related to what CBE is “looking for.” This is a process of creating grounded theory, which means that explanation (the “making sense” part) slowly manifests itself after reviewing and reflecting on the data (rather than testing pre-determined hypotheses). In CBE, there is a need for sense-making throughout the data collection and continually revisiting the analytical framework, or the “looking for” part. This is called **iteration**. The research team constantly, but cautiously, looks for insights on

the community story, like solving a puzzle piece by piece. In this way, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously and as the data are iterated and studied the story will change. This is normal. Grounded theory also calls for **deliberation**, whereby individual team members explain the community story to each other as they understand it from their experience. It is again normal for different team members to have a different “version” of the story; but in sharing it and presenting it to each other, the team deliberates and either arrives at a consensus or determines where gap-filling is necessary.

GP 7: CBE is a collaborative team research process.

A major distinguishing factor of the CBE approach is the quality of the research team and its role in the project. In many, if not most projects—both quantitative and qualitative, the field researcher is thought of as an enumerator, data recorder, or focus group facilitator. Even though these individuals have significant context knowledge, they have little or no participation in the design of the research and no role in the analysis and discovery of insights. They are hired, trained, sent to the field, then released. In contrast, in the CBE approach the team members are treated as *researchers* not data gatherers, and they occupy key essential positions in

the design, data gathering, analysis, and interpretation of findings. This advanced role for the team members implies a set of necessary requirements for each individual member:

- University-level training: at least an undergraduate degree
- Previous experience in development and, ideally development-related research
- Openness to teamwork and peer learning
- Intellectual curiosity about the reality of others
- Ability to communicate across social lines



In CBE, the entire team designs the project from the inception. There is no distinct phase in the CBE process that we call training, if by this we mean that a set of instructions and tools are handed down to fieldworkers by supervisors. Rather the design period is collaborative. This phase of CBE may last for a month, and it involves intense interaction of all team members. During this step, the specifics of the approach are collaboratively laid out, the necessary skills to carry out the research are collaboratively built, and the plan of action is collaboratively designed. The desired outcome of this co-production of the approach is to extend ownership of the entire project to all team members and participants. And as a corollary result, the technical knowledge of research and the local knowledge of context brought by the team members are effectively interwoven into the design of the approach.

LEARNING MOMENT 2

Looking For and Looking Where

The “looking for” in CBE is often referred to as the research question (or research problem). It is the area of knowledge and understanding that the research team is attempting to expand. In this Bangladesh case, CBE is designed around two large questions: 1) have women’s empowerment (status) and social inclusion of the marginalized residents of the community changed in the direction of greater equity over the last 20 years of NGO presence and activity; and 2) does the change in power relationships increase the resilience of households and the community in terms of managing risks. Underlying this *looking for*, of course, is a theory of change. In this case, that theory would state that greater women’s empowerment and social inclusion will increase the resilience capacity of the community and its residents.

The looking for is the backbone of the research and the reason why the research has been proposed. It is, however, much more complex than just looking for change. The looking for has multiple layers that are incorporated into the research framework. For example, there are secondary questions that focus on what is meant by change in power relationships and women’s empowerment; on how the change occurred; who was affected by the change; and how has this change modified current community dynamics.

The “looking where” is another critical decision point in the CBE approach and is determined by the “looking for,” or the research problem. In traditional qualitative and quantitative research, the looking where is known as the sampling strategy. The CBE team must decide what communities will be visited and what kinds of people will participate in the research. This is what is meant by a *sample*. The challenge of any sample is to assure that the range of variability of the relevant local reality is captured in the information produced by CBE activities. This requires previous knowledge of known sources of variability. We are usually confident that communities in different socio-ecological contexts will experience different realities relevant to our research problem. This is due to the varying environmental characteristics, but also to unique histories, location from public infrastructure, and perhaps cultural or ethnic origins. Within such contexts, however, it is possible that the differences among communities are not large enough to influence our “looking for”. For example, if our objective is to unearth evidence of change in women’s empowerment, we must ask ourselves what community-level characteristics might be sources of variability? How much variability do we expect across communities in this case?

LOOKING FOR IN NORTH AND NORTHEAST BANGLADESH

In the case of Bangladesh, the “looking for” is to identify evidence of change in women’s empowerment and social inclusion in communities with a long history of NGO activity including SHOUHARDO in its several iterations. For example, much of SHOUHARDO programming at the community and local levels included interventions designed to create awareness of women’s status and enhance women’s participation in social and economic life. The projects also created local institutions, such as the Village Development Committee (VDC) and the women’s Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) as programmatic strategies to enable greater participation of traditionally excluded groups. The CBE team thus looks for evidence within the community that this type of slow-moving change has indeed occurred. The team members look for this evidence in livelihood changes, in mobility, in public participation and decision-making, and in increases in agency among marginalized groups. This is “looking for”.



The second grand challenge is what researchers call *external validity*. This means: do the findings from one community represent all the communities in a specific region, or do they represent other communities *enough* to guide a cross-community analysis. Quantitative research focuses heavily on external validity and designs sampling strategies that allow an acceptable estimate of representativeness. Qualitative studies do not engage in random sampling (the gold standard for external validity) but rely on purposive non-random sampling that involves fewer communities or individuals. The trade-off is that qualitative research focuses more on complex variables—attitudes, norms, and values—that tend to vary less within communities and among communities as compared to such characteristics such as income, food production, and years of schooling, which can vary widely from household to household.

VALIDITY IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

For qualitative studies, sampling is critical. It typically involves deliberate selection of participants to ensure collection of thorough, detailed information that helps explain the phenomenon of interest. Validity in qualitative inquiry is reached by uncovering the worldview and experience of a range of diverse respondents. The goal is to *capture* the range of views of the population. Some practical guidance for qualitative research is provided in the following report.

Fox, K., Cook, H., & Peek, N. (2023). *Qualitative Toolkit: Qualitative Methods for Monitoring Food Security Activities Funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance*. Washington, DC: Implementer-led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) Activity.

The sampling strategy for CBE is a critical step in the approach, as it is in all research approaches. In CBE, the primary sampling unit is the community. Sampling decisions regarding what community to include are usually based on prior knowledge about variation relevant to the key research topics (e.g., norms regarding women’s empowerment). Often, we expect that the differences from

one community to another will reflect some large-scale factor (or combination of factors), such as environment, location and isolation, ethnicity, and interaction with such external actors as NGOs. Those factors (identified pre-selection) form the basis of a purposive sampling strategy, as exemplified in the box below.

SAMPLING IN NORTH AND NORTHEAST BANGLADESH

The CBE project decided to sample eight communities. The overall focus was on the most vulnerable regions in Bangladesh, the char and haor communities in the North and Northeast regions of the country. The selection process was guided by the following factors: a significant long-term presence of NGOs in the local communities; the unique socio-ecological characteristics of the char region as contrasted with haor regions; known differences due to remoteness (near char, remote char, near haor, deep haor); the level of development progress in the communities, as previously measured by CARE/Bangladesh staff; and the amount of time available for the team. A sampling structure was developed to account for four main sources of variability. The structure of the resulting sample is summarized in Table 2: Four communities in the char and four in the haor; four more remote (in each region) and four less; four displaying more development progress and four less progress.

Table 2. The sample of Bangladesh communities according to sampling criteria.

Location \ Development Level	More Progress	Less Progress
Remote char	Pashchim Rajibpur	Purba Bepari Para
Less Remote char	Bara Dargah	Mushrot Nakhenda
Deep haor	Manik Khila	Durlovpur
Less Deep haor	Notun Krishno Nagor	Horipad Nagor

LEARNING MOMENT 3

The Community Context

The pathways of change within any community are influenced by contextual factors that contribute to the reality experienced by community members. The external context provides an important framework for understanding the internal dynamics of the community itself. In Bangladesh, the local environment and the institutional structures were the two areas of context deemed most relevant for this CBE study.



Local Environment

Development practitioners are very much aware that communities are the on-going product of adaptation to the local environment. In the case of North and Northeast Bangladesh, this is particularly true, where lives and livelihoods are subject to the seasonal dynamics of climate and hydrology. Knowledge of climate variability and river hydrology at the regional level help to explain the history of land use, the pattern of livelihood diversity, and the roots of power inequality. In fact, the distribution of current vulnerabilities in North and Northeast Bangladesh cannot be understood without reference to riverbank erosion, char formation, and patterns of annual flooding. Any CBE team must begin community fieldwork already armed with this understanding of the characteristics of the environmental context that directly affect change in the community. This

information on environmental context is usually available in secondary documents, research reports, and public records, but also can be derived from key informant interviews with local experts.

In most regions where development projects are implemented, the environment presents a primary source of risk, and communities can readily compile timelines of extreme events—shocks and stresses—that have shaped livelihood adaptation, demographic mobility, access to resources, public investment, and so on. Shocks and humanitarian crises are often regional in scope but experienced locally. As part of understanding this environmental context, the CBE quest is to document this record of extreme events (and the impacts) at both the regional and community levels.

Institutional context

Communities do not exist as isolated units but are integrated into wider institutional networks to a greater or lesser extent. One such institutional element is the form of governance, which includes the political structures that manage public goods. Governance is not only political leadership, but the policies and regulations administered by this leadership. In the case of Bangladesh, there is a multi-level political structure from national government to the “locally-elected bodies,” as they are commonly called. The primary politico-administrative unit in rural areas is the “Union” which is administered by a “Union Parishad” (local council) of nine members, one of which is the chairman, a position of great power and influence. The presence of a UP member in a community constitutes a significant advantage in terms of access. Parallel to the formal political system, there are traditional institutions that govern certain elements of community life. In Bangladesh, it is important to understand the authority and composition of such institutions as the Salish and local mosque and religious groups.

As communities are integrated into the regional and national polities, so do they gain access to public services, infrastructure, and public goods investment. This is the policy side of governance. The influence of such policies is reflected in access to public service providers, schools and health infrastructure, roads and communication, and, importantly in our communities, access to the social safety net. Many social programs target different community members—the elderly, the extreme poor, the widowed, the food insecure, disaster victims, etc.—but all these components of the safety net are channeled through and influenced by local politics. An understanding of this institutional context is another tool for an effective CBE analysis. Again, such information can be acquired through secondary reading of national and regional policy, but also through key informant interviews with service providers, NGO staff, and locally-elected leaders.

LEARNING MOMENT 4

The CBE Team in the Community

The value of contextual information lies in preparing the CBE team for the key phase of the approach: the time spent in the community. The team presence in the community, direct communication with its residents, systematic observation of patterned interaction, and researcher participation in community activities are the factors that generate the effectiveness of the approach. Under CBE, the team spends around two weeks with the community and, preferably, in the community.² Typically, the team consists of a pair of researchers, and at least one should be a female. We emphasize that the skills necessary to conduct these community activities are co-produced with the team as part of the overall preparation. This section addresses the set of activities that constitute the fieldwork phase:

Initial introductions

As part of the sampling process, CBE team members visit the selected communities to explain the project and propose their participation. Since these communities have interacted with NGOs for decades, the presence of outsiders in their midst is not unusual. Nonetheless the nature of the introduction is critical for ceding ownership of the research question to the community itself. In most cases, the initial contact begins with the formal and informal leadership of the community, then an open meeting of all interested residents from the different neighborhoods (in Bangla, *para*) of the community. Elements of these introductory meeting should include the following:

- Full and transparent presentation of the purpose of the research project, with an explanation of how this project was initiated; the sources of funding; the use of the information;
- Complete layout of fieldwork methodology; length of time in the community; the role and activities of the researchers; assistance needed from community members;

- Detailed introduction of the CBE team members who will be staying in the community; who they are, their home villages, and their development background;
- A clear statement of the voluntary nature of participation in the research, including assurances that individual identities will be protected, and all information will be confidential; and
- Clear declaration that this research does not provide material benefits to individuals or the community benefits and is not tied to participation in subsequent NGO projects.

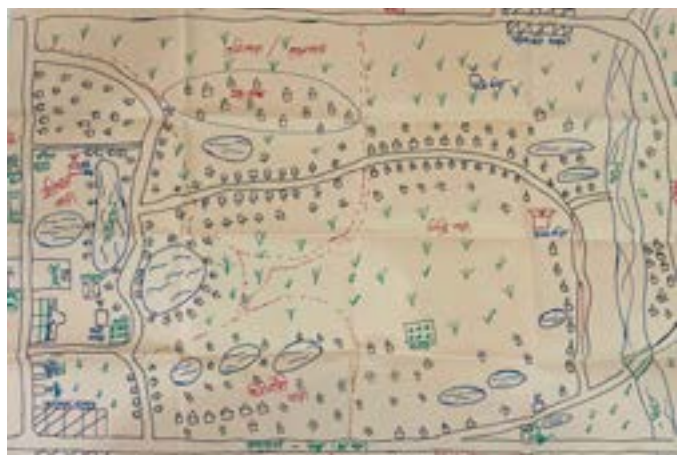
It is possible that the introductions phase will occur in multiple visits, since the desired goal of this component of CBE is to enlist community interest and ownership in the focus of the project...in this case, changes in social interaction over the last 20 years.

² In many rural communities of Bangladesh, overnight accommodations are difficult and can impose burdens. In our case the team arrives early morning and stays interactive in the community until night.

Data gathering in the community

In CBE, the understanding changes in values and norms as they structure social relationships should be treated as a puzzle...consisting of many pieces. The challenge is to locate and place the pieces that tell the overall story of the community. As stated in our guiding principles, fieldwork is a continuous experience for the field researcher, and data collection and analysis are simultaneous, not isolated and sequential processes. So as the CBE researcher participates in a conversation about change with a community member, that input piece is immediately analyzed/interpreted for its fit in the overall puzzle. And, it should be remembered, a puzzle is seldom solved in a single try. It is rather like a learning curve, with each piece helping to determine what next piece to look for. The following activities constitute “data-gathering” in the CBE approach:

- **Walking the community:** As a first step, the research pair encourages a community member to accompany them on a tour of the community. In rural Bangladesh, a typical community consists of various *paras* or neighborhoods that share a social or historical feature, such as religion (e.g., *Hindupara*) or occupation (e.g., fishers) or origin story. The interrelationships among different paras are sometimes indicative of patterns of social exclusion. Walking the community provides a good sense of the spatial distribution of the community population as well as the spatial patterns of vulnerability since different paras tend to vary in terms of exposure to flooding, riverbank erosion, and other stresses. The outcome of a community walk is usually depicted on an informal map created by the team.



- **Informal conversations:** The research pair is constantly aware of what they are “looking for.” As they integrate into community life, gain confidence in their own interaction with members, and learn more about social relationships, the pair of researchers engage in informal conversations about topics that are both relevant to the research but of interest to community

members. Most households are pleased to talk about their own histories, their daughter working in a garment factory in Dhaka, their livelihood activities, participation in important community events, and so on. We refer to these as informal, because the conversation is not directed by a specific topic outline or question guide. It is more important that the community member think of the conversation as a “sharing” moment rather than a question-and-answer session.

- **Observation:** What the research team sees is as valuable as what it hears. Social interaction is often a public act observable to all around. Where people go in the community, with whom they interact, the terms of engagement, as well as where they do not go are data in the research sense. Observation can be both an opening for conversation and a check on the consistency of spoken data.
- **Participatory focus groups:** In contrast to the traditional FGD in which a facilitator works from a set of questions which are posed to the group, in a participatory focus group, the dynamic seeks to involve the researcher as a member of the group engaged in a group discussion on some element of community life. For example, an entrée such as: “*I was watching a group of men working in the paddy yesterday. Are they from around here....?*” will open a broader discussion of farm labor livelihoods. The participatory technique seeks to minimize the formal frame of researcher-respondent and to make the interaction more spontaneous.
- **Community participation:** Although two weeks is a short period of time, there can arise opportunities for researcher participation in community events, such as preparations for a wedding or funeral, sitting in on a

community meeting, even helping with household chores. This form of social interaction builds trust but positions the researcher to experience social interaction directly.

- **Visual documentation:** The omnipresence of the mobile phone and its visual recording technology has enabled photo registry as an important documentation

tool. Although it is important to recognize the ethical limits to ethnographic photo-taking, such as capturing individual identities without permission, this can be an insightful tool, especially when local residents are the photographers. In this case, it is important to discuss the motives and the meaning of the photos in small groups.

It is important to emphasize that with CBE data collection methods, the principles of human subjects protection are maintained as with any research project. These protections assure confidentiality (no identities are recorded in final data set) and informed consent (all participation in any data collection episodes, including photos, is voluntary). As presented above, the introduction to the community provides clear explanations of the project.

Data-gathering skills

The skills of the field researcher are fundamental to the effectiveness of the CBE approach. Many feel that such skills as interviewing are an art, possibly innate to the researcher. We don't agree with that position and propose that data gathering skills can be acquired through a co-production process. The necessary skills are as follows:

- **The informal interview:** Even the informal conversational interview is a profound act of human communication. It recognizes the shared humanity among people who may have different backgrounds, status, and experience; it insists that a person or group of people, as fellow humans, are essentially interesting and that what they have to say is worth listening to. It is a fatal mistake, research-wise, to look at an interview as the exchange (or, worse, the mining) of information. The researcher must *want* to know about the experiences and the reality of others, and without this deep curiosity about others, an interview will never achieve its communication potential. In any interview, formal or informal, there is a subconscious "frame" that guides the flow of social interaction.³ Both interviewers and the respondents engage the interview event with unspoken rules about appropriate behavior. In most interviews, both sides wish to make the interaction "successful" and have subconscious standards for what success means. In development contexts, the focus group will usually seek to provide answers they assume (via their subconscious rules) the interviewer wishes to hear. Many times, however, power and status distort the interview, when for example the interviewer accepts a chair and sits over the focus group on

the ground, and the interaction will be fashioned by such class differences. The frame often makes the interview predictable, almost performative, and does not allow for spontaneous, open interaction. The skillful interviewer can "break the frame" by resetting the subconscious rules of engagement. One way is to deliver the ownership of the research question over to the community participants. Other interviewing skills include the sequencing of topics discussed. We have asserted that the individual or group participating in the interview wish it to be successful—as any social interaction is meant to be. If a conversation begins with topics that are easy to talk about, the respondents will gain "confidence" in the progress of the interaction and will be better inclined to address more challenging topics. The interviewer or facilitator in any interview must also be monitoring the success of the exchange. This involves an intense mental awareness of assessing whether a respondent is comfortable, whether non-verbal signs would suggest avoidance of a topic, and so on. In this case, it might be necessary to redirect the course of the conversation or conclude it altogether. In general, once the team agrees upon the nature of a successful social interaction, the relevant skills can be co-produced.

³ This is inspired by the monumental work of Erving Goffman. See: Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974, 586 pp. *Strategic Interaction* (1973).

- **Focused observation:** As with interviewing, observation requires intense mental awareness. The observer constantly processes sensory (visual/auditory/olfactory) data within a framework of ideas derived from the “looking for” objective of the research. Thus, what is being observed is being actively interpreted into mental constructs...**at the time of observation!** Observation is a highly rich source of information especially in triangulation with what has been heard or said in conversations. Inconsistency in what is said and what is observed provides great insights into the nature of social interaction.
- **Participatory research tools:** Participatory methods and tools have a firm hold in qualitative research. The tools themselves are “props” to initiate a conversation around how a group of community members organize their lives temporally and spatially, how they prioritize,

and how they classify and evaluate important dimensions of their perceived reality. Most researchers are familiar with the maps, the seasonal calendars, the wealth-ranking, the priority matrices, the Venn diagrams, and so forth. But for CBE, the true value of using participatory tools lies in the potential to enable community members to reflect on elements of their lives usually taken for granted (see Bourdieu’s *habitus*), such as gender and power relations. These dimensions of daily existence are seldom problematized in routine interaction, but the participatory session presents an opportunity to focus on these values and norms which operate at a subconscious level. Furthermore, when done properly, participatory sessions shift ownership of the research question to the community itself, generating the desired reflection without the need for detailed questioning, as research commonly does.

Data recording strategies

Data gathering processes produce information. However, community information cannot solve research problems if it remains in the head of the researcher. Due to the expanded role of the field researcher (not just data collector), data recording in CBE has an analytical character. There is great emphasis in CBE on effective notetaking (every team member has the **Golden Notebook**, as we like to call it) and, if appropriate, audio recording of conversations. Observations are also recorded in the notebook. If we can imagine a day in the community filled with conversations with individual and groups, a visit to the local market, taking a meal with a family, and other activities that CBE classifies as “fieldwork,” much data are accumulated in notebooks and memory in the course of that day. It is imperative that the data are recorded and registered from the notebook (and memory) as soon as possible, usually in the evening or the next morning. These data go through

a first analytical process in that they are first transferred into a textual accounting of each notebook episode. The conversation with a shopkeeper, for example, becomes a “piece of data” and is written up as such. The story of that conversation (or observation) can include a paraphrasing of the content, verbatim statements, and the researcher’s personal assessment of the event and the content. In this way, data recording is cumulative: conversation/observation → notebook → registry of the fieldwork episode. As more and more episodes are registered, the team then engages in the next step, the initial analysis, by organizing the episodes into categories relevant to the “looking for” of the research. As a final output of the fieldwork, each community is depicted in the “**community story**,” a detailed accounting of that community in a text file. How that text file is organized is described in the following section.

LEARNING MOMENT 5

First Order Analysis—Social Actors, the Social Landscape, and Testimonies of Change

The first order of analysis that goes into the community story is determined by the research question. Using Bangladesh as an example, the purpose of the research is to document change in values and norms that govern social relationships, particularly with regard to women's status and the inclusion of marginalized groups. The analytical process is logically sequential, carried out in steps.

Identify the social actors

The CBE team's first challenge is to identify the range of **social actors** in a community. Social actors are individuals who occupy a social space acknowledged by all members of the community. These individuals carry specific characteristics that define a social identity: the landowner, the farm laborer, the shopkeeper, the imam, the traditional leader, the Salish member, the fisherman, the Hindu, the household head, the wife, the rickshaw wallah, the schoolteacher, the moneylender,

and NGO staff member. In a sense, they are social types of individuals who live in the community and interact with fellow members. As the CBE team moves around the community and becomes more familiar with the residents, they identify the social actors to the point that a **social landscape map** can be constructed. This is not a physical map but a social one and helps visualize the composition of the community in terms of social actors.

Discover pathways of social interaction

The next challenge in the fieldwork is to document the social interaction and social relationships among the social actors. The CBE team in conversation and through observation determines, for example, the types of interaction between landowner and agricultural laborer, the women engaged in groups, the shopkeeper and clientele, the Hindu fisherman, and the traditional leader, residents in one para with residents in another para, women and market vendors, husband and wife, parents and children, and another other interaction that might

manifest the exercise of power. The team must reach the point where it understands the terms of engagement between the landowner and the farm laborers, fishermen and the boat or net owners, members of different paras, husband and wife, and elite and poor. Perhaps members of one para do not participate in community meetings; women do not go alone to the health clinic; different groups attend different mosques; Hindus and Muslims do not intermarry; women perform farm labor only at harvest; and the many other pathways of social interaction.

Compile testimonies of change

The first order analysis ends with an inquiry into how these pathways of interaction have changed over 20 years. The initial analysis of change in social interaction is compiled from informal testimonies of change by different social actors. Most people anywhere can articulate how household roles have changed, how women now go freely to market, new sources of employment and income generating activities, who can become village leader, new

types of community institutions, and new contacts with external actors. Fundamentally all change in a community alters social relationships, be it a new road, the cell phone, new policies, or NGO programs. The outcome, then, of this learning moment is three-part: the identification of social actors (the social landscape), the pathways of social interaction, and the testimonies of change.

LEARNING MOMENT 6

Second Order Analysis— Patterns of Change by “Bucket”

In this next learning moment, the testimonies of change are organized into categories as a second order of analysis. We call these categories: **buckets** of change. As the team analyzes the notes from the fieldwork activities (conversations, observations, etc.), they classify the information under key themes that were co-produced during the preparation phase.⁴ The key buckets that provide evidence of changes in values, norms, and behavior include the following:



History of significant events

Every community has a history of significant events that have defined the community’s uniqueness and its change over time. In rural Bangladesh, a community has a settlement story that explains how different groups, set themselves up, and occupied specific space in the community. The dynamics of occupation are particularly interesting against the environmental backdrop of riverbank erosion, char formation, and haor flooding. Another complex determinant of settlement in Bangladesh is the availability of public lands (*khas* lands) and the policies that govern access. The history of a community does not end with settlement and occupation. There are always events seen as significant and formative of the community of today. These include infrastructure

(roads, bridges, communications) investments, public services (education, health, public transportation), major shocks and disasters, marketplaces, and new employment opportunities (e.g., ready-made garment factory). The two most important historical elements in this analysis are (1) the arrival of NGOs and their activities in the community projects; and (2) the history of significant shocks and extreme events, such as flooding, storms, and drought. Through interviews and other sources, the CBE team documents the two-decade presence of NGO activities in the community and how the community responded to the historical sequence of major shocks. This bucket becomes a component of the overall community story.

⁴ It is entirely possible that the first week in the community will suggest other buckets that were not anticipated in the co-production phase.

Changes in livelihoods

A second important analytical bucket is the change in livelihood activities. In the CBE approach, we think of livelihoods in terms of “who does what” to maintain the household and community. Through time, it is expected that livelihoods will adjust to such factors as public investment, environmental pressures, and changes in power relations. Also, the presence of NGOs in the community would likely influence livelihood patterns through activities directed at technology change,

increased resources, and household diversification. The analytical focus on social landscape and social interaction can reveal where those changes in livelihoods are in evidence. And it is important that livelihood change is intimately related to change in women’s status and infrastructure investment as well as NGO influences. Thus, in this bucket, the CBE team analyzes how livelihood options have changed for different social actors, including women and marginalized groups.

CHANGES IN LIVELIHOODS IN NORTH AND NORTHEAST BANGLADESH

In the remote and inaccessible areas of four villages, due to technological and educational advancements, young and middle-aged men aged between 18–35 are shifting away from traditional occupations such as farming and fishing and are embracing new professions within the country and abroad. Over the past ten years (since 2013), there has been a growing trend among young men and middle-aged individuals from lower-middle-class and economically disadvantaged families in rural areas to engage in professions such as garments, auto-rickshaw driving, masonry, and carpentry, particularly in Dhaka and Chittagong within the country. Moreover, the young generation are now venturing towards assured earning opportunities rather than facing the uncertainty in agricultural professions. This transition not only impacts their economic and social status but also plays a role in shaping their political standing. Furthermore, over the past 5 to 6 years (since 2018), there has been a significant increase in the inclination of young men and adolescents in this region to go abroad. With the ease of accessing information and services through mobile phones and the internet, they can easily communicate with their relatives and loved ones both within the country and abroad. This has led to a growing trend of migration among the youth and young adults in the area.



Changes in women’s status

Changes in women’s empowerment represents a shift in deeply entrenched values, norms, and behavior. Different social actors may have differing perspectives on how the roles and status of women have evolved over time. In the case of Bangladesh, the CBE team looks for evidence women’s mobility and decision-making within the household and community, the abandonment of such oppressive practices as dowry and early marriage, and

public disapproval and policing of gender-based violence. CBE, however, also looks for insights into the opportunities for women inside and outside the community, increases in public roles for women, and in general a more expansive respect for women outside their households. The NGO-based activities designed to provide women with economic opportunities and to raise awareness of women’s status are an important part of this analysis.

Changes in power relationships

In a parallel fashion, there is an analytical bucket that assesses change in power relationships among different groups in the community. This analysis is complex and requires much subtlety. In most communities, groups are marked by certain social markers, such as ethnicity, religion, race, occupation, class and caste, and types of social interaction among these groups are rigidly constrained. Such areas of interaction as marriage, political voice and participation, open mobility, and access to public goods are shaped by the values and norms that govern power. Yet, power itself is manifest

in multiple ways, as we have discovered in rural Bangladesh. There is power that restricts access to resources and to public participation—what we have called “power over.” But there is also a form of power that is manifest in “agency,” or “power to do.” In this latter case, the CBE team looks for evidence that previously “invisible” members of the community have increased their agency through collective action, public representation, and access to public goods, such as safety nets and public services.

Changes in risk-minimizing strategies

The final analytical bucket is to document changes in how different social actors respond to shocks and stresses. Where climate and environment impose regular risk to lives and livelihoods, as is the case in North and Northeast Bangladesh, different social actors are positioned to engage different strategies. The CBE

team gathers evidence of how this range of actors have responded to such events as flooding, extreme storms, and riverbank erosion of agricultural fields. More important is an understanding, from the perspective of community members, or how these strategies have changed through time.



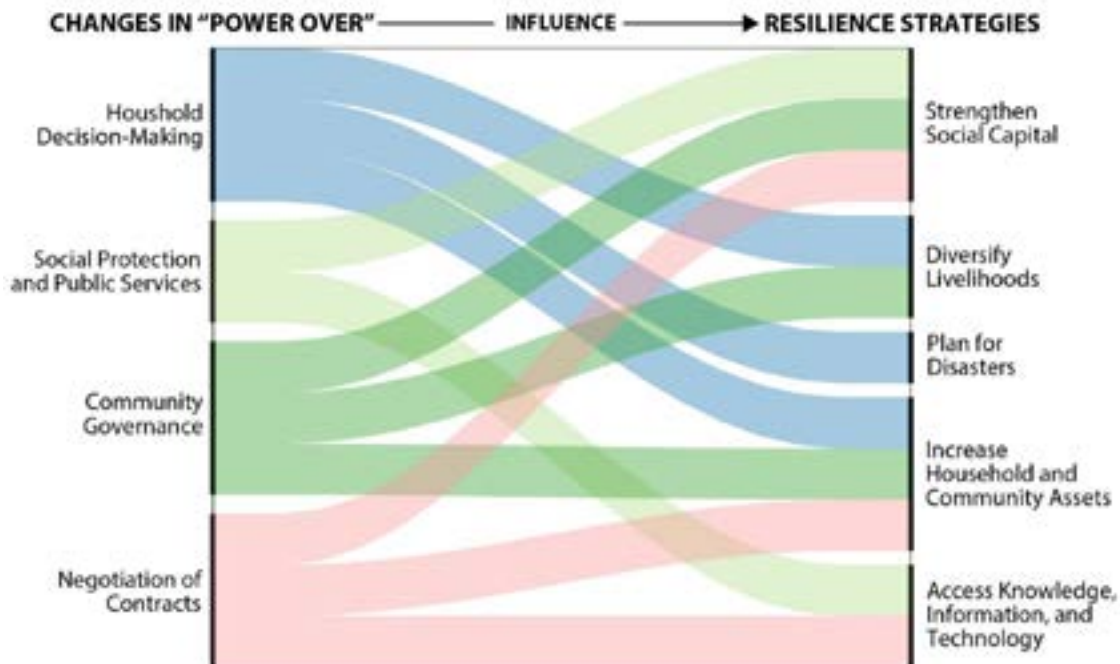
LEARNING MOMENT 7

Third Order Analysis— Resilience

The third order of analysis is to assess the bucket changes described above in terms of resilience capacities at the household and community levels. We define resilience as the ability of households, communities, and systems to manage shocks and risks in ways that do not endanger lives and livelihoods. Moreover, in our approach, resilience is seen as a pathway for transformative change. In the case of North and Northeast Bangladesh, where riverbank erosion, extreme and unanticipated flooding, and severe storms occur regularly, the resilient community (household/system) achieves through time a “new normal” that reduces the negative impacts of these risk events.

In this guidebook we are focused on how changes in power relationships contribute to support resilience capacities. The analytical bridge is between changes in, for example, women’s empowerment and social inclusion, and changes in how households and communities have responded to severe crises. At this analytical juncture, the CBE team has acquired an understanding of changes in these values, norms, and behavior and has gathered evidence on how different community groups address the reality of extreme flooding and other shocks. The third order challenge is to provide evidence of associations between these two spheres of change. This is the most difficult component of the analysis and must be based on solid evidence from the field experience.

Association of Patterns of Change with Resilience in North and Northeast Bangladesh



LEARNING APPLICATION 1

CBE as Tool for Assessing Project-Related Change

It is proposed above that CBE is a flexible approach with multiple applications in the project development cycle. As an approach that builds trust and rapport in a community, it is particularly effective in revealing the dynamics that drive changes in social values, norms, and the terms of engagement among people with differing access to power. In complex development projects, it is much easier to integrate a new rice variety into a farm system or vegetables into a household diet than to revise the role of women in society or to find a place for the poor Hindu fisher in public affairs. Social values and norms reside deep in the collective culture of the community and are not subject to frequent self-reflection. For example, people do not usually “question” women’s role in the

household but accept it as given. In fact, over more than 20 years, the SHOUHARDO program in Bangladesh has worked to change values and to promote the exercise of basic rights and inclusive participation by the poor. Many of its program interventions have sought to change how people think about each other, to raise the awareness of rights, to distribute economic opportunities more widely, and to mobilize the support of important external stakeholders, such as locally-elected officials. CBE has the set of methods to analyze this subtle undercurrent of change in values, norms, and behavior, to demonstrate the long-term influence of NGO messaging, and to assess the sustainability of such changes post-project.

LEARNING APPLICATION 2

CBE Application for Localized Programming

We endorse this CBE approach as a tool to be employed at the initial phases of project design to help generate local ownership of a program or project. Increasingly, NGOs seek to establish avenues of community participation in the development of longer-term projects. This process has been labeled “**co-creation**,” and it represents a crucial step in the long journey to achieve participatory, localized development. Nonetheless, projects are often designed far away from the community by “experts” of one sort or another, who based their ideas on a conceptual framework of change with little community input. Participation is defined as support for the project ideas at community level or to determine how the community is willing to participate. With CBE, on the other hand, the community becomes a partner in the programming process at the beginning. The CBE team spends time in the community to verify the **social**

landscape and identify patterns of social interaction among **social actors**. It can mobilize the different segments of the community around a discussion of priorities and facilitate the preparation of a “community plan” of action around the relevant program theme. In this way, CBE encourages the community to reflect on its current reality, set a problem-solving course toward a consensus goal, and help define the intervention set.

Consistent with the goal to **localize** development programming, the CBE approach has the potential to contribute to local ownership of a program of change. Community ownership is responsive to existing power relationships but assures the inclusion of all. By design, CBE activities in a community create opportunities for the expression of voice, and the confluence of disparate voices forms the basis for consensus-building.

Limitations of CBE

There are limits to CBE approach both in terms of methodology and application. First of all, it is an intense qualitative activity that requires a significant investment in time and preparation. Most qualitative approaches are designed in episodes of short visits to a community, whereas CBE embeds researchers in a community for periods of two weeks or more. The traditional qualitative study tends to target a specific segment of the community—the ultra-poor, vulnerable women, local leadership; but CBE targets the community as a whole and embraces all types of members. This takes more time. Another factor that is time-intensive is the preparation of the CBE team. Since team members are not data collectors, but researchers, they participate in all phases of the research. This requires a research mentality, solid research skills, and an analytical ability. While the approach insists on co-production of the design, it will also involve certain areas of training in specific skills, such as observation, interviewing, and participatory tools. This also takes more time.

With regard to the potential of CBE, not all research problems are appropriate for this approach. Its best

application lies in the inquiry into the more subtle aspects of community life—the cultural underpinnings that guide social interaction. It is designed for change in values and norms, perspectives, ambitions, and aspirations, all of which adapt slowly to external pressures. As with all qualitative approaches, there arise issues of validity. What do the findings from one community allow to say about another community. It is not designed, for example, to estimate the distribution of mean landholdings in rice paddy, but rather provides insights on the relationships between landowner and farm laborer in unstable risk environments.

Thus, the major limitations to CBE are expressed in terms of capacity, time, and scope. It requires significant research capacity on part of the team, which is sometimes scarce in the local context. It requires time to develop team capacity but also to earn the trust of community members. Finally, the scope of CBE is also limited and best focused on elements of community life which do not change rapidly, but which have a significant impact on well-being, participation, and resilience.

Conclusions

This guidebook describes an innovative approach to measure change that moves slowly and to better understand how changes in power dynamics impact resilience outcomes. The development community increasingly looks for approaches that can identify sustained change post-project. At the same time, the

current emphasis in development programming lies on local ownership and design of intervention strategies. There is a need to engage communities in determining their own development pathways. Community-based ethnography offers a contribution toward these noble ends.