

# Community-Based Ethnography (CBE) for Resilience Outcomes: A Practitioner Introduction

## A METHODOLOGY BRIEF

Mehrul Islam<sup>a</sup>  
Fatima Seema<sup>a</sup>  
Nayeem Hasan<sup>a</sup>  
Saima Akter<sup>a</sup>  
Baishakhi Ghosh<sup>a</sup>  
James Soren<sup>a</sup>  
Faysal Ahmed Shovo<sup>a</sup>  
Timothy Finan<sup>b</sup>  
Zack Guido<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> CARE Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh  
<sup>b</sup> University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, USA

February 7, 2024





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*This report was made possible by a grant from The Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) Activity. The IDEAL Small Grants Program is made possible by the generous support and contribution of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of the materials produced through the IDEAL Small Grants Program do not necessarily reflect the views of IDEAL, USAID, or the United States Government.*

## COMMUNITY-BASED ETHNOGRAPHY

This brief proposes a methodological approach, *Community-Based Ethnography (CBE)*, designed to identify long-term changes in local power relationships and the subsequent impacts on local resilience capacities. CBE was developed in the context of a study in the vulnerable *char* and *haor* regions of northern Bangladesh that recorded changes in social inclusion of the ultra-poor and marginalized groups generally, and more specifically in women's status and empowerment.<sup>1</sup> Power relationships among men and women and non-poor and poor are deeply embedded in the culture and social values and, although seldom publicly articulated, are practiced in the daily flow of social interaction. CBE structures the observation to the community-level exercise of power and provides a framework to then assesses how changes in power affect the capacity to manage the shocks and stresses. This brief is not a how-to guidebook, but rather an introduction to the principles and practices of CBE and its application to resilience programming.

***Community-based Ethnography***  
*CBE adapts traditional ethnographic methods to the specific contexts and constraints of development practice. It has two interrelated uses: 1) as a tool for learning and knowledge management, and 2) as 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.*

### WHY CBE?

Complex programming with multiple sectors, interventions, and actors at multiple levels requires a strong foundation of knowledge and understanding of the participant communities. An effective development program also requires community ownership built upon the engaged and sustained participation of community members during the design, implementation, and evaluation phases. NGOs are well aware of these requirements, but creating the necessary community partnerships is difficult under traditional programming strategies. The information base for most large-scale NGO projects is traditionally compiled using quantitative surveys of baseline indicators and qualitative needs assessments derived from rapid, short-term visits to community leaders. CBE takes its inspiration from ethnography, a long-standing methodology in the social sciences that pursues a deep understanding of community norms, values, and behaviors from the perspective of community members themselves.

CBE differs from traditional programming approaches in three ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Gender, Power, and Resilience in the Char and Haor Regions of Bangladesh: Evidence-based Learning for Resilience Programming. Report presented to IDEAL. December 2023

## Role of the Field Researchers

Commonly, NGOs (or their contractors) hire data-collecting teams to gather quantitative and qualitative information for program design or evaluation. The training of the field team is limited, and its role ends once the data are delivered. The field team often does not participate in the design of the fieldwork or in the analysis of the information. In CBE, the design of the research, the data collection, analysis, interpretation, and write-up are carried out by the entire team, including field researchers. There is no distinct training phase organized to convey a set of instructions and tools that are handed down to fieldworkers by supervisors. Rather the “training” period is collaborative and involves frequent intense interaction among all team members. It may last several weeks during which time the specifics of the approach are collaboratively laid out, the necessary skills to carry out the research are collaboratively identified, and the plan of action is collectively designed. A primary objective is for all members in the team to share ownership of the project from start to finish.

### ***The CBE Research Team***

*In many, if not most projects, the field researcher is thought of as an enumerator, data recorder, or focus group facilitator. By contrast, the team members are researchers not data gatherers, and they fully participate 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*
- *Previous experience in development-related projects*
- *Accumulated knowledge of local contexts*
- *Fluent in the local language*
- *Ability to communicate across social lines*
- *Intellectual curiosity about the lives of others*
- *Effective teamwork skills and open to peer learning*

## Community Engagement

Rather than a rapid visit featuring a target number of FGDs and interviews, the CBE team initially spends two weeks in the community and systematically sets out to *know* the community, the diverse neighborhoods, the range of community actors, the livelihood patterns, and networks of social interaction. For this period of time, the CBE team becomes part of the community, residing there, sharing meals, visiting homes, shops, and fields. With this extended contact, the team seeks to build rapport and local trust, gather contrasting narratives from different community actors, triangulate findings across multiple data collection episodes, and resolve doubts and inconsistencies regarding data. Extended field activity enables a richer quality of data but also cultivates a sense of community ownership in the research. This strong initial engagement is reinforced by recurrent visits:

## Categories of Information

In traditional programming approaches, the initial information gathering phase is focused on sets of indicators that describe patterns of resource access and utilization, livelihood assets, coping strategies, and so forth. In contrast, the CBE team seeks to understand the social dynamics and power relationships that generate the distribution of community resources. The

emphasis is on the process of change in the relationships that lie behind asset ownership and utilization. The focus of CBE is on the following.

*Understand the exercise of power in a community*

The exercise of power is manifest in access to resources (e.g., land and fishing rights) and in the expression of voice (e.g., participation in community decisions). CBE maps out these power relationships across different kinds of community actors in terms of the patterns of social interaction among them.

*Provide evidence of 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. In Bangladesh (as elsewhere), NGOs have long labored to influence the social values that impede advances in well-being and fulfillment for women and excluded groups. The focus of CBE is upon how changes in these social values and norms have occurred over time and impacted the lives of different actors.

*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 local shocks and stresses. It analyzes how improvements in agency and voice for women and excluded groups expand resilience capacities.

*Cultivate community partnerships for program design and implementation*

One key objective of CBE is to enhance development programming for NGOs by promoting community ownership of the process of change. Thus, CBE seeks to build a strong bridge of trust and rapport with community members as a critical first step toward effective community partnerships for programming design and implementation.

## **CBE IN THE COMMUNITY**

In its initial field engagement, the CBE team spends around two weeks with the community and, if possible, resides continuously in the community during this time. The team consists of a pair of researchers, male and female, and they will work at times together and at times individually in the community. The skills necessary to conduct these community activities are co-produced with the team during the design phase. The key steps are as follows:

### **Initial introductions**

The CBE team undertakes an initial short visit to the selected communities to present the project and request community participation. The introduction is critical for achieving community ownership of the research project. Usually, the team begins with the formal and informal leadership of the community, then organizes an open meeting of all interested residents from the different neighborhoods 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 description 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 experience.
- A clear assurance of the voluntary nature of participation in the research, including the protection of individual identities and the confidentiality of all information provided. These statements must be complete, clear, and explicitly understood by all.
- Clear declaration that this research does not provide material benefits to individuals or the community and is not tied to participation in subsequent NGO projects.

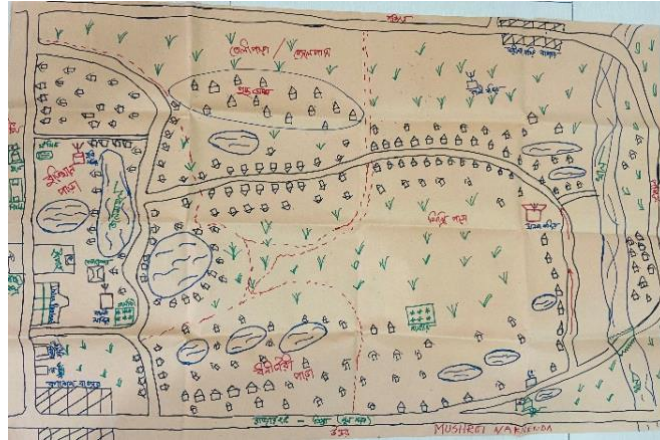


Figure 1. A hand-drawn map of a community. The exercise of mapping a community helps reveal differences that are evident in spatial patterns of habitation, community infrastructure, and social differentiation.

It is possible that the introduction phase will stretch out over multiple visits, since the desired goal of this component of CBE is to elicit community interest and ownership in the project.

### **CBE data-gathering activities**

In CBE, the understanding of changes in values and norms as expressed in social interaction should be treated as a puzzle with many pieces. The challenge is to identify and situate the pieces so that together they tell the overall story of the community. CBE fieldwork is not broken into discrete moments of interviews or FGDs as in more traditional fieldwork. Rather it is a continuous on-going experience for the field researcher with multiple forms of data collection. The process of analysis occurs simultaneous to the data collection. As the CBE researcher engages in a conversation about change with a community member, the subsequent information is immediately analyzed for its fit in the overall puzzle. 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

To understand the spatial distribution of the community, the research pair recruits a member to accompany them on a walking tour. In any rural community the distribution of residence clusters can reflect social differences, such as those based on religion, caste, occupation, or origin story. The interrelationships among different neighborhoods are often indicative of patterns of social exclusion or differences in vulnerability due to exposure to

flooding, riverbank erosion, and other stresses. The research team directs the conversation to relationships between neighborhoods, and systematic observation is a key source of information. The outcome of a community walk is usually presented in an informal map created by the team to depict the physical and social landscape of the community as shown in the Figure 1.

### Informal conversations

The research team is constantly aware of what they are looking for in terms of the puzzle. As they integrate into community life, gain confidence in their own interaction with members, and learn more about social relationships, the researcher team engages in informal conversations about topics that are both relevant to the research and of interest to community members. Most households are willing to talk about their own histories, such as their daughter working in a garment factory, their livelihood activities, participation in important community events, and so on. The conversations are informal because they are not directed by a specific topic outline or a 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. Where people go in the community, with whom they interact, the terms of engagement, as well as where they do not go constitute relevant data in the research sense. Observation can be both an opening for conversation and a check on the consistency of spoken data. As a distinct skill, observation requires intense mental awareness and keen perception. The observer constantly processes sensory (visual, auditory, and olfactory) data within a framework of ideas derived from the objective of the research. Thus, what is being observed is being actively interpreted within the research question. 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, as well as guideposts for additional observation to bring clarity to the inconsistencies.

### 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, this form of a participatory focus group features a group discussion on some element of community life in which the research participates as a group member. For example, in an informal group the researcher might offer an entrée such as: *“I was watching a group of men working in the paddy yesterday. Are they from around here....?”*, with the intent to stimulate 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.

### Participatory rapid appraisal

Most researchers are familiar with the maps, the seasonal calendars, the wealth-ranking, the priority matrices, the Venn diagrams, and other tools used in participatory 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. The true potential of participatory rapid appraisal is achieved when the visual stimulates reflection on elements of community life usually taken for granted, such as gender and power relations. When done properly, participatory rapid appraisal shifts ownership of the research question to the community itself, generating the desired reflection without the need for detailed questioning, as other methods do.

### 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 and positions the researcher to experience local reality 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.

## **Data recording strategies**

Due to the expanded role of the field researcher (not just a data collector), data recording in CBE has an analytical dimension. There is great emphasis in CBE on effective notetaking and, if appropriate, audio recording of conversations. Each field team member has a notebook to record the output of different data-gathering episodes, including observation. A day in the community can be filled with conversations with individuals and groups, a visit to the local market, a meal with a family, all of which is classified as fieldwork, and these types of data accumulate in the form of notes during the course of that day. The data go through a first analytical step in the form of 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 substantial and cumulative, and requires constant effort by the researcher to record in the notebook what he or she hears, sees, and reflects. As more and more episodes are registered, the team then organizes the episodes into categories relevant to the objective of the research. Team sharing of reflections on the data gathered each day furthers the analytical process. As the final output of the fieldwork, each community is depicted



in a **community story**, a detailed accounting of that community in a text file. The analytical framework is presented in the next section.

## **CBE ANALYSIS IN THREE STEPS**

The analysis of the information gathered with the community members occurs in three steps. The framework of analysis is always determined by the overriding research objectives and thus specific to a particular context, in this case the impacts of changes in women's empowerment and social inclusion on resilience capacities in rural Bangladesh. The process of implementing a CBE analysis, however, is readily adapted to other contexts.

### **Step 1: Social Actors, Social Landscapes, and Testimonies of Change**

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 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.

From an understanding of the social landscape, it is possible to document the **social interaction and social relationships** among these social actors. The CBE team through conversation and observation seeks to understand for example, the terms of engagement between the landowner and the farm laborers, fishermen and the boat or net owners, members of different neighborhoods, husband and wife, and elite and poor. Perhaps members of one neighborhood 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. These pathways of social interaction represent the exercise of power.

In this first analytical step, the team also documents how these pathways of interaction have changed over a sufficiently long period, say 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, such as how women can more freely travel to the market and have expanded opportunities for employment, who can become village leader, and the new types of community institutions. Fundamentally, all change in a community alters social relationships, be it a new road, a new technology like the cell phone, new policies, or NGO programs. Thus, the outcomes of this first step include the identification of social actors (the social landscape), the pathways of social interaction, and the testimonies of change.

## **Step 2: Patterns of Change by Category**

In this next step, the testimonies of change are classified into categories that directly speak to the overall research objective. The relevant categories are specific to context and would change from one project to another, as determined by the team. From the example of Bangladesh, the following categories were explored in the data set.

### *History of significant events*

Every community has a history of significant events that define a community's uniqueness and its change over time. For example, each usually has a settlement story that explains how different groups arrived and occupied a specific space in the community. Then 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 relevant historical elements in this analysis were (1) the arrival of NGOs and their activities in the community projects; and (2) the recurrence 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 information becomes a component of the overall community story.

### *Changes in livelihoods*

A second important analytical category is the change in livelihood activities. 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 indicate where those changes in livelihoods are in evidence.

### *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 category that assesses change in power relationships among different groups in the community. 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 category 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.

## **Step 3: Impacts on Resilience Capacities**

The third step in the analysis is to relate changes in the analytical categories above to changes in resilience capacities at the household and community levels. Resilience is considered the ability of households, communities, and systems to manage shocks and risks in ways that minimize the impacts and duration of recovery from the shock or stress. 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. CBE seeks evidence of how one sphere of change (power) is associated with change in resilience capacity. In the example of the Bangladesh study, women’s increased mobility (participation in revenue generating activities) is directly associated with anti-flooding homestead investments. This is the most difficult step of the analysis and must be based on solid evidence from the field experience.

## **CBE: APPLICATIONS**

### **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 CBE provides the 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 for Community Partnerships**

Although this CBE approach was designed specifically to explore the resilience impacts of changes in power relations, the extended interaction with communities in the study suggests that CBE can provide valuable support to NGO programming. Increasingly, NGOs seek to establish avenues of community participation in the development of longer-term projects. This co-creation process represents a crucial step in the long journey to achieve participatory, localized development. With CBE, the community can become a partner in the programming process at the beginning. As 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.

### **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.

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.

## **CONCLUSION**

This methodological brief is an introduction to an approach that extends beyond the traditional set of quantitative and qualitative methods employed in development learning and programming. It differs in terms of the interaction between the community and the research team, the roles of field researchers, and the time spent cultivating community ownership of the research itself. It seeks a sustained community partnership in the process of development change. It is proposed here that CBE is particularly effective in documenting evidence of change in slow-moving, deeply embedded values, norms, and behaviors and in tracing the resilience outcomes of this change. But it is further suggested that the CBE focus on community partnership can contribute value-added to the process of development programming. While CBE was designed within the context of rural Bangladesh, it promises a more general application to other countries and contexts.