

Ensuring Quality Services: Quality Standards, Internal Learning and Project Management

COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES (CLS) PROGRAMME

LEARNING BRIEF



This brief shares lessons and suggestions for improving quality of legal service delivery, NGO ownership of good practices, and overall project management processes.

LESSONS INCLUDE:



Use Quality Standards to benchmark good practices in legal services by NGO partners



Time, support and 'internal learning' build ownership of quality services



Field monitoring is essential to drive practice of quality services by NGOs



Grant making, team staffing, and partner budgeting practices improve quality of programme delivery

BACKGROUND

The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) designed the Community Legal Services (CLS) Programme in Bangladesh to broaden and test different approaches to the delivery of legal services to more effectively reach greater numbers of the poor and marginalised. In Bangladesh, large national legal specialist NGOs have decades of experience providing legal aid for the poor, especially women and girls, and key regional specialist NGOs have expertise in establishing fair mediation of disputes by grassroots community groups. While the CLS Programme did fund services by these experienced national and regional NGOs, it broke new ground by also supporting legal service provision by development-focused NGOs. Work with these NGOs by the CLS Programme produced major lessons learnt in strengthening legal service provision to help inform future programming.

In its five years of implementation, the CLS Programme expanded access to justice making legal services available to an estimated 13.9 million people in 1232 rural unions or urban wards or 16% of the country. It did so through building citizen awareness of legal rights and supporting the just resolution of disputes through mediation or litigation in cooperation with communities and the Government of Bangladesh. Mediation was by far the most common method of resolving disputes at 73% of the total with litigation used for hard to resolve disputes or serious crimes. Over half of these mediations were conducted by NGO-trained community mediation groups. Over 70% of the beneficiaries of the CLS Programme were women and girls. CLS also supported NGO efforts on research, advocacy and public interest litigation to reform laws and policies or improve their implementation when needed.



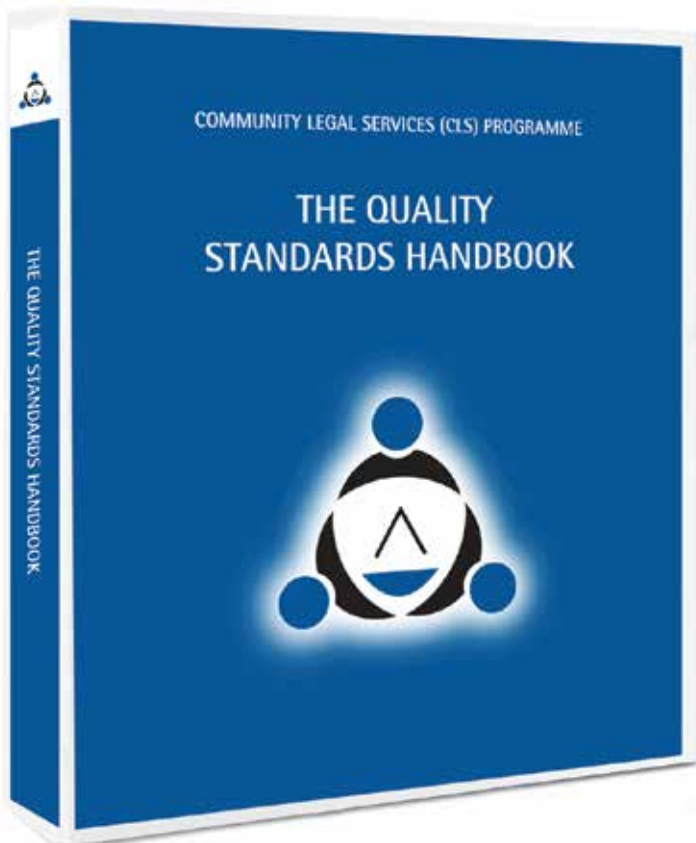
LESSONS LEARNT

QUALITY STANDARDS

Quality Standards can set a benchmark for quality of legal service provision identifying good practice for NGOs in serving all clients regardless of organisation type, size, or communities served. For most NGOs, effective field monitoring is essential to reaching Quality Standards of service provision.

Under the Capacity Building component managed by British Council, CLS introduced the use of Quality Standards to NGOs in Bangladesh for the first time. The CLS Quality Standards were assisted NGOs in improving quality of legal service delivery by institutionalising an understanding of quality requirements at all levels of the organisation – from frontline field staff to mid-level supervisors to NGO management.

The Standards are based on key Principles under each of which are several standards. The Principles cover a range of areas: providing services based on local needs and priorities, especially to the marginalised; demonstrating clear understanding of CLS modalities and gender, inclusion, and equity issues; providing clients information



and advice relevant to needs including guided referrals to other services; ensuring appropriate staff selection and training to support quality of services; practicing appropriate policies and procedures on privacy, confidentiality and feedback; and developing functional governance, management and monitoring for accountability to stakeholders.

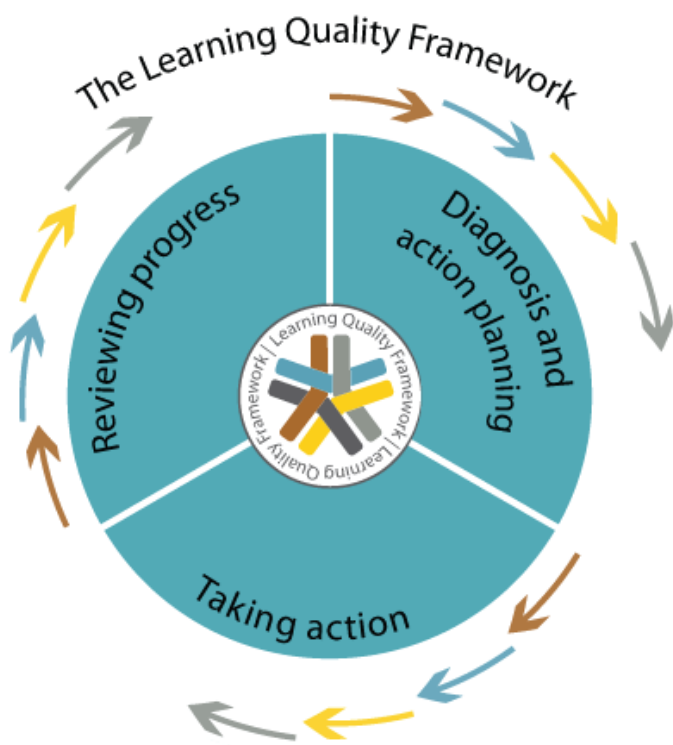
Early introduction of Standards

Quality Standards should be introduced early in the grant period. Acceptance and implementation of practices under the Standards by NGO partners takes time. Concepts must be seen as practical and beneficial to ensure the Standards are not seen as just another funder requirement but a set of practical guidelines for improving quality of services in the field. The Standards do not seek standardisation but recognise diversity and difference among organisations. They provide common principles and good practices applicable to any size or type of organisation working on legal services.

Combining Capacity Building with Field Monitoring

CLS held multiple, in-depth capacity building workshops on legal knowledge, the distinction between legal information vs. legal advice, the development of mediation skills and attitudes, and detailed requirements for referrals to other services. Partners were required to confirm their scheduling of internal workshops to 'cascade' these lessons down to staff serving clients, and supporting guidance notes on key topics and translations into Bangla were provided.

However, capacity building workshops orienting partners on the Standards and good practice were insufficient to achieve significant quality improvements for all but a few of the best managed NGO partners. The CLS field monitoring unit played an essential role in driving quality improvements through frequent visits to observe NGO field practices and provide on the spot guidance to NGO staff and managers. To more closely align field monitoring objectives with the Quality Standards, CLS capacity building and field monitoring units jointly developed a new field monitoring checklist.



The Standards themselves were revised with extensive partner input in a final participatory workshop, and published in a Quality Standards Handbook for NGO use in sustaining quality legal service practices in future, and made available on the CLS website at <http://communitylegalservice.org>.

To improve NGO ability to learn from and improve their own work, the CB unit trained all partners in LKM techniques. These techniques included exercises, diagrams, and other tools that NGO managers could apply to draw out learning from field staff and identify changes to existing practice to improve service to clients. The most proactive NGOs incorporated several of these techniques into their internal practices. For the same purpose, CLS also conducted a series of LKM sessions with NGO partner staff, beneficiaries and stakeholders facilitated in the field by a senior CLS field monitoring specialist.

INTERNAL LEARNING

Quality Standards need to be owned by partner organisations. Partners need sufficient time, support and strengthening of 'internal learning' practices to achieve this.

While field monitoring improved the quality of service delivery it was not sufficient to develop partner ownership of the Quality Standards. To this end, steps to strengthen 'internal learning' by NGO partner were put in place. These included the use of an Action Planning process, training in Learning and Knowledge Management (LKM) techniques, emphasis on sound human resource practices and staff development, and introduction of beneficiary feedback systems.

Action Planning and LKM

At the conclusion of each Quality Standards workshop, each partner prepared an Action Planning worksheet identifying gaps between their existing policies and practices and QS guidelines, and support needed to fill these gaps. Worksheets were used by CLS to develop tailored training support for partners and to inform field monitoring teams. CB support included development of a detailed set of CLS guidance notes distributed to partners.

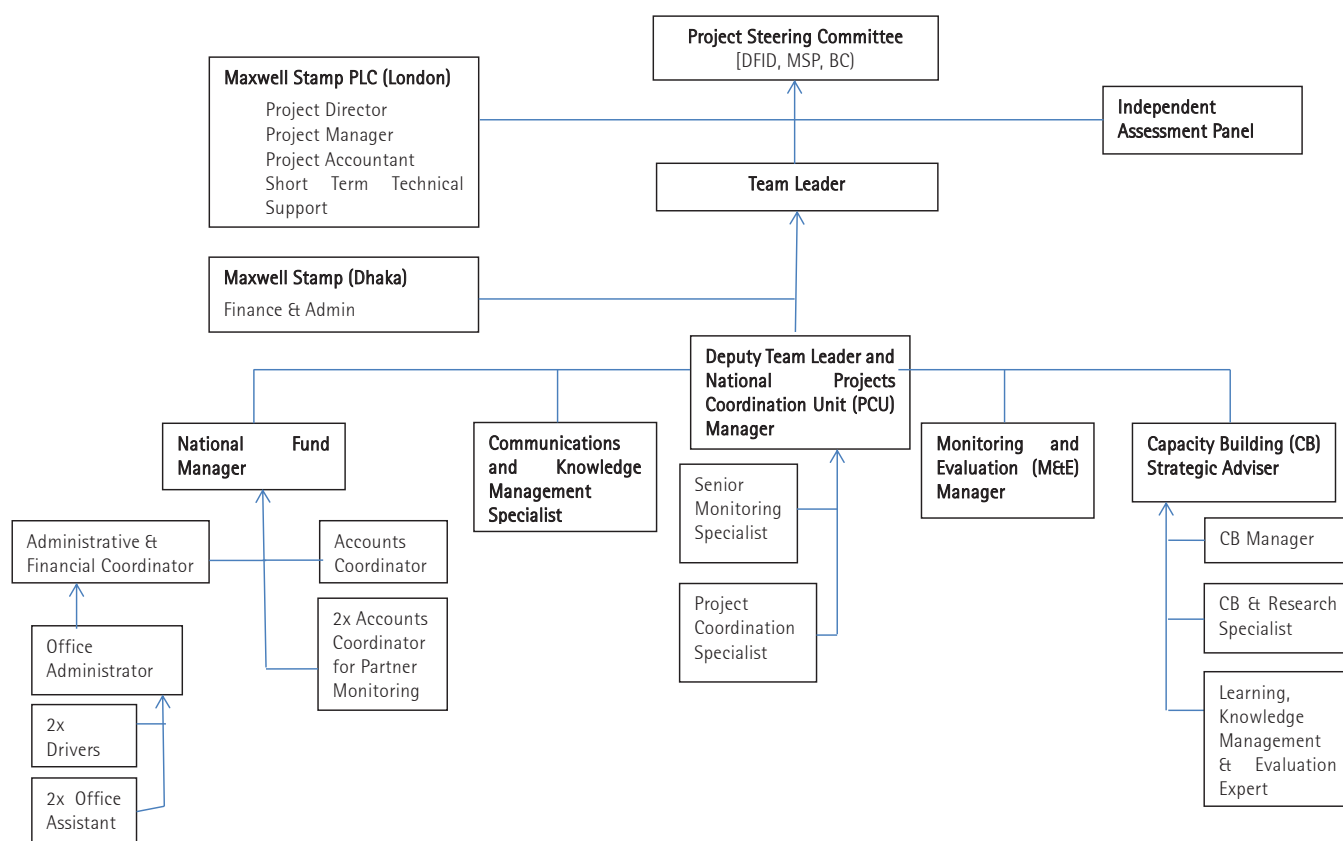
Developing human resources and listening to beneficiaries

To achieve quality service delivery, proper recruitment, training, supervision and support of staff is essential. A key principle under the CLS Quality Standards, guidance on sound human resource development focused not only on specific tasks required but also on respectful attitudes towards clients and clear understanding of community needs. Supervision and support to 'front line' staff that deal directly with clients is at the heart of achieving quality delivery.

CLS provided detailed guidance on human resource good practices such as orientations to the organisation and the project for new staff, use of job descriptions, regular assessment of staff capacity, as well as individual appraisals and a functioning grievance mechanism. Many grantees acknowledged this guidance and amended their human resource policies and practices as a result. Similar approaches were applied in developing capacities of the many community members and traditional and local government leaders trained by NGO partners.

Direct feedback from those benefitting from services can guide some of the most well received improvements in legal services. CLS required all partners to introduce

CLS Team Organogram



beneficiary feedback mechanisms and report on changes made based on this feedback. Guidelines suggested potential practices such as suggestion boxes, periodic focus groups with beneficiaries, and use of simple formats for written feedback. Beneficiary calls for changes to 'courtyard' awareness meetings, more frequent mediation sessions, more patient but courageous mediators, and greater respect from lawyers towards women resulted in partner changes to these services.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Early and rapid grant making increases effectiveness of NGO legal services.

More implementation time in the field has multiple benefits: access – increased claims by justice seekers, quality – improved application of legal knowledge skills by NGO staff, and (3) sustainability – deeper mastery of, and commitment to, mediation by community members, and stronger referral relationships between NGOs and government legal aid offices, making it more likely both will continue post project.

To maximise field delivery time for grantees, future projects should plan for (1) the first and largest grant making round in the first project year, (2) a target duration of first round grants of at least four years, with grants reviewed and renewed at the two-year mid-point subject to satisfactory performance, and (3) use of standardised and simplified formats for grantee proposals which set an overall budget limit and if required geographic areas to be covered.

Careful consideration of project team structure and requirements supports improved implementation.

Achieving the right combination of staff positions and skills can play a significant role in supporting programme delivery. Administering CLS programming requires technical knowledge and skills specific to legal services but also experience with working with a broad range of NGO grantees. Part-time experts and international consultants have a role to play primarily in the early phases of the project with a limited role thereafter. For the remainder of the project period, full-time national

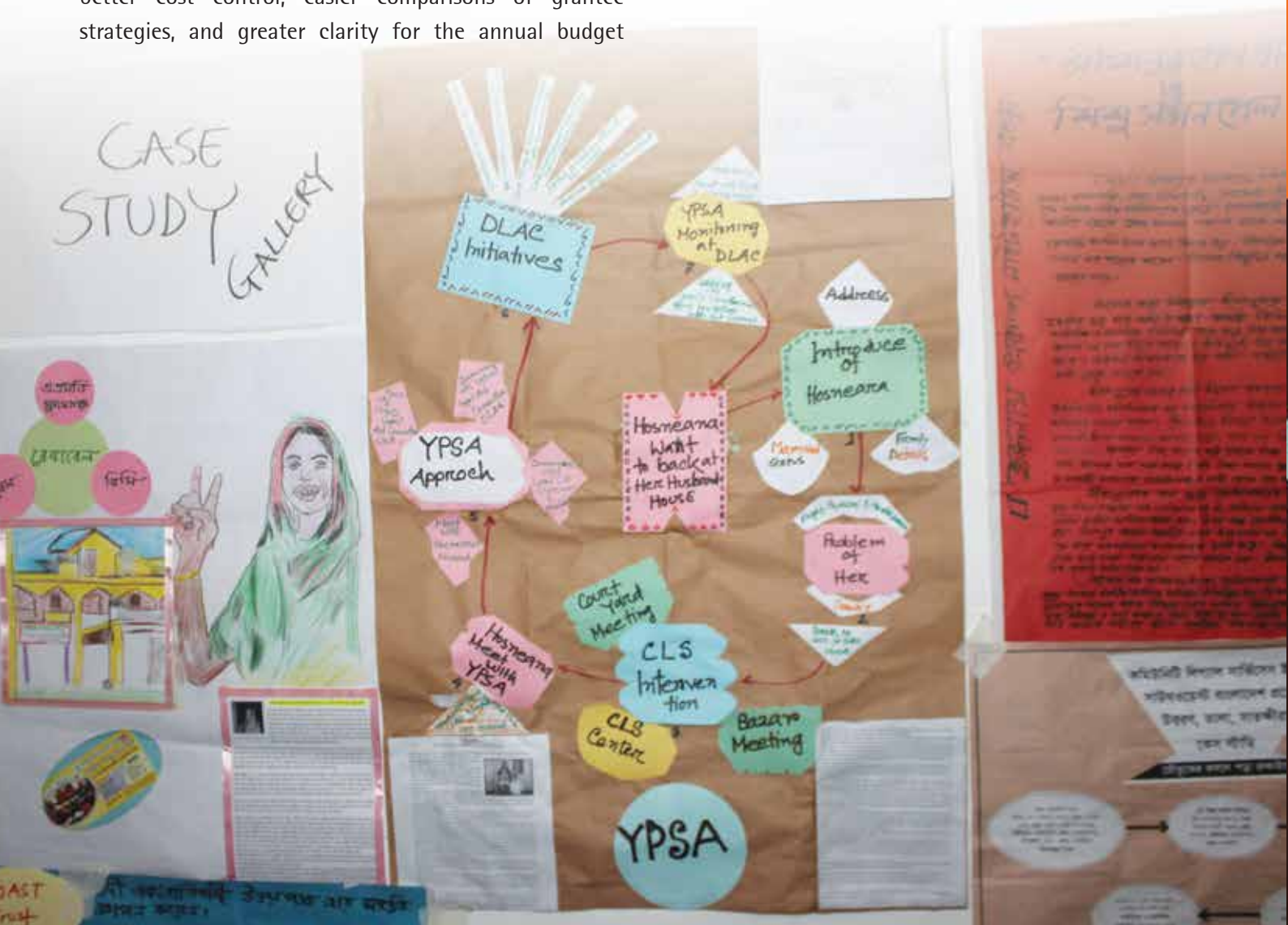
staff with legal service and NGO oversight experience is essential to provide the ongoing technical support needed to build NGO capacity and improve NGO field performance.

Standardisation of grantee budgets and reporting improves fund utilisation and activity implementation.

Standardisation of budgets early in the project has many benefits. CLS introduced a standard budget format with an agreed set of cost categories (such a venue, food, transport, materials, consultancy, etc.) mid-way through the project. This exercise was done primarily to facilitate Value for Money analysis but had other benefits including better cost control, easier comparisons of grantee strategies, and greater clarity for the annual budget

revision process. During the revision process, CLS reviewed field challenges and learning with grantees before agreeing on specific changes in activities to improve quality of services.

All grantees used a common accounting software package and submitted monthly financial reporting using a standardised template. A Monthly Activity Reporting Template in Excel was introduced which sharply reducing grantee reporting error and a requirement for grantees to seek approval before incomplete activities could be carried forward to the next quarter improved implementation pace, fund usage, and spending forecasts.



CLS PROGRAMME

A programme funded by the UK Government and implemented by Maxwell Stamp PLC, British Council and the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR)

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