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Abstract

This article explores the potential of using participatory action research as an adaptive programming modality to drive learning and innovation to tackle the drivers of (and seek to eliminate) the Worst Forms of Child Labour. We draw on our experience from early phases of implementation of a large-scale action research programme, which despite the constraints covid-19 posed in moving to full implementation and participatory engagement with children and other stakeholders on the ground, is already generating rich learning about the opportunities and challenges of designing programmes that respond to the complex reality of WFCL. We share early learning about what it takes to be fully open to using the lived experience of programme development, and early findings from scoping and mapping of the dynamics of social norms, business practices and urban neighbourhoods and supply chains influencing WFCL in Bangladesh and Nepal, to frame and reframe the questions and response strategies and operationalise a participatory adaptive intent to work with hidden and complex dynamics that characterise the WFCL.

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Introduction

This paper explores the early phases of implementation of a large scale participatory adaptive programme (CLARISSA), designed to generate evidence about and innovation in response to Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL) in Nepal and Bangladesh. Our starting point is a recognition that child labour is a complex problem and requires programmatic responses that embrace complexity.

The increased global commitment to child rights and greater visibility of child labour in supply chains linked to global brands is resulting in more attention and programming focused on its elimination. The Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour was adopted by the ILO in 1999 as ILO Convention No 182 and asks countries to develop plans for its eradication (Avis, 2017). This remains a critical international framework guiding action, yet the ways in which child labour as a problem, and in particular its worst forms, are defined, framed and responded to are full of contestation.

The well-rehearsed definitional disagreements (e.g. Maconachie et al. 2020; Bhukuth, 2008) around what categories constitute forms of labour that are harmful to children is evidence of the complexity that lies beneath a seemingly simple and agreed problem than needs urgent action. While the ILO definition of ‘unconditional “worst” forms of child labour, internationally defined as slavery, trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labour, forced recruitment for use in armed conflict, prostitution and pornography, and illicit activities’ (Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182, 1999) is largely uncontested, definitional ambiguity arises around article 3 (d) of the Convention “work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children”. Adding to the definitional mix is that countries are required to develop their own contextualised definitions while international measures used to build policy and interventions are still unable to distinguish between harmful and beneficial work (Bourdillon *et al.* 2010). In Bangladesh, for example, the Child Labour Action plan of 2012 was designed to eradicate child labour entirely and has been extended now till 2025 as part of the National Child Labour Elimination Policy. Government interventions include the removal of children from dangerous workplaces alongside strengthening the education system, funding research and investing in public health and nutrition. In Nepal a multi-faceted legal framework builds on the Labour Act 2007, the Children’s Act 2018 and the National Master Plan to End Child Labour 2018-2028 with a National Plan of Action in development. The overarching aim is to eliminate child labour and currently prohibits labour of children under 16 in hazardous work yet focuses on sectors as hazardous rather than the type of work. Interventions are focused largely on reforming the education sector and child protection to support the elimination of child labour.

The international landscape of child labour programming in large part, therefore, still responds to the underlying assumption that all work for children is ‘bad’ and, can be traded off against ‘goods’ such as education. Yet the drivers that push and pull children into the

worst forms of child labour (WFCL) are not easy to understand or isolate. Programming responses that are built around reductionist attempts to isolate drivers into clear and measurable variables, show mixed results at best. For example, two studies on microcredit programmes in Bangladesh found conflicting effects on child labour. Charkabarty (2015) found it reduced child labour, albeit less through microcredit alone than in combination with microinsurance, but Islam and Choe (2013) found that instead, microcredit increased the probability of child labour. The former effect stems from a reduction in household vulnerability, the latter from adults spending more time out of the home running enterprises – forcing children to take on a greater burden of household work. Such evidence of the interactions between multiple actors leading to child labour linked to long and often not well understood supply chain dynamics, contribute to unpredictable patterns of change. Under such conditions, designing interventions to only respond to one aspect of the complex interactions, and often the variable that is easiest to measure, are unlikely to produce appropriate or sustainable outcomes.

The agency of children is mostly absent from intervention design, despite a matured policy framework recognising children's right to participate and make decisions about matters that affect their lives (Raenaert et al. 2009). Children's agency also exists within a complex system of power dynamics with peers, families, adults in communities and in work settings, local labour environments and on the streets in towns and cities and at different points of global supply chains. Johnson's (2017) change scape model (which inspired DFID's social-ecological approach) illustrates the importance of understanding that children's well-being is nested within all of these relationships and results from interaction across each of the different interconnected domains. The fact, for example, that most children are working in family businesses shows that work and family relationships are often intertwined. The links between school, home life and working life are interconnected – there is no simple trade-off between school or work or family support – indeed in poor households these are often complementary realms of activity for children, and in certain contexts there is a commonly held view that the combination of engaging in school and work is preferred by and may in fact be beneficial for children. Further, families that are most vulnerable, are characterised by intersectional inequalities which means that single interventions (such as the provision of primary education) are unlikely to be effective on their own. Consequently, interventions that might be able to shift underlying drivers of child labour, and specifically target those forms of work that cause harm, must orient towards working with long and uncertain causal chains; they must take complexity seriously.

Ideas of complexity and complex systems approaches to addressing development challenges are not new, indeed applications were first discussed over twenty years ago. Chambers (1997) was an early champion, arguing that the unpredictability of development which arises when it is viewed through the lens of complexity, suggests that diverse, locally grounded responses should be nurtured instead of imposing top down and externally designed solutions. It was not, however, till a 2008 working paper by the Overseas Development Institute (Ramalingan et al. 2008) that we see the first substantive attempt to situate what complexity could mean to the development and humanitarian sectors as a whole.

Since then, practical examples of how complexity thinking can help to reshape strategy, institutions and practices have been proposed (Ramalingan 2013). A critical dimension of complexity is that change is non-linear, multi directional and multi causal (many factors lead to single outcomes and single factors lead to many outcomes) leading to unpredictable causal pathways. The unpredictability of how change comes about means that very small interventions might have large impacts and large interventions can have little or no impact (or indeed negative impacts). What is required is to identify leverage points and this is best done through engagement with actors in the system who are the agents of change (Burns & Worsley, 2015). Methodological contributions for navigating complexity include action research and in particular Systemic Action Research (Wadsworth 2001, 2010; Burns 2007). Their iterative nature, involving a continuous participatory process of review and reflection enables learning about if and how outcomes emerge to be surfaced and fed back into design and planning.

Applications of SAR in the context of bonded labour (not exclusively with children) have shown promising results (Oosterhoff and Burns, 2020) but have not yet been applied in an intentional way and at a large scale to WFCL. In this paper we share early learning from a partnership of research and development organisations working collaboratively since 2018 using SAR in the context of WFCL in urban neighbourhoods in Bangladesh and Nepal. We, the co-authors, are members of the programme's management team, responsible for programme co-design and implementation of participatory and evaluation research and supporting partners who lead the research in the context of the leather supply chain in Dhaka, Bangladesh and the adult entertainment sector in Kathmandu, Nepal. We first introduce the programme and its intentional learning design for facilitating iterative reflection on our programmatic assumptions. We then describe the specific ways in which the approach has thus far led to reframing, reconceptualising and refining the programmes interventions in response to the reality of working children – to remain focused on the goal of embracing and working with, rather than reducing complexity. Our contribution at this early stage of programming is necessarily focused on our processes as full participatory action research with children is still in the initial phases. We offer some tentative conclusions about the complex dynamics of WFCL, and share implications for ongoing adaptive programming.

CLARISSA: A participatory programme at scale

As noted above, CLARISSA is an action research programme focused on tackling the underlying drivers of the WFCL in urban neighbourhoods in Bangladesh and Nepal¹. Funded by UK Aid (FCDO), it is implemented by a Consortium of partners working across research and implementation. Led by the Institute of Development Studies, an international development research centre, and implemented in collaboration with three child rights organisations: Terre des Hommes Foundation; ChildHope; and Consortium for Street

¹ Myanmar was part of the original design but in 2020, a combination of Covid 19, UK Aid budget cuts and the military coup led to the closure of the Myanmar programme.

children, and implementation and research partners in each country². Partners bring complementary experience in participatory and child-centred programming. From its conceptualisation, we set out the programme intention to apply a participatory approach to produce and use multiple forms of evidence on the drivers of WFCL. In particular, a focus on evidence generated by children and other stakeholders expands the narrow approach to evidence that characterises the sector, and that relies largely on ‘synthesized evidence products’ based only on expert driven evidence generation, and which largely favours experimental evaluation designs³ (Apgar, 2019).

The aim of the programme is to uncover systemic dynamics of WFCL, uncover what drives children into WFCL and generate innovative solutions to the underlying drivers, recognising that the problem requires that we first listen to the lived reality of working children. In Nepal, the focus is the adult entertainment sector in several neighbourhoods in the Kathmandu valley, and in Bangladesh the leather supply chain in Hazaribagh and Hemaytpur neighbourhoods in Dhaka. Central to the programme design are 20 participatory processes in each country: 18 participatory action research (PAR) groups, a children’s’ research group and a children’s advocacy group. In addition, in Bangladesh, an innovative social protection intervention will test universal and unconditional provision of cash together with family-oriented case work and community development facilitation in one slum neighbourhood in Hazaribagh, Dhaka reaching 1800 households. This scale of participatory interventions makes it a highly ambitious programme, with large participatory research teams operational in each country (including 77 full or part time in country and international staff across the programme).

The overarching implementation design is modelled on SAR (Wadsworth 2001, 2010; Burns 2007, 2015) a programming modality that places emphasis on two dimensions of social change. Firstly, that interventions must be rooted in an understanding of how change happens. The approach hypothesizes that change results from interventions in complex systems and posits that it is necessary to reveal the causal dynamics of those systems, the inter-relationship between factors in them in order to design interventions that work and are sustainable. The second is that in order to create systemic change it hypothesizes the need to build processes across systems to provide multiple perspectives on the issues, and multiple entry points for change. This requires numerous participatory processes to be implemented in parallel with learning mechanisms building connection across different parts of the system.

Using action research as the intervention modality the programme’s theory of change hypothesises that facilitating participatory processes can generate community owned solutions tailored to the lived experience of working children, their families, employers and other actors in the system (see Snijder & Apgar, 2021 for further details on how this informs programme evaluation). The significant departure from common intervention modalities is that by definition, the specific concerns that become opportunities for shifting dynamics that

² See <https://clarissa.global/the-people/> for a full list of programme partners

³ DFID How to Note on Assessing Strength of Evidence: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/291982/HTN-strength-evidence-march2014.pdf

push and pull children into WFCL are defined by the participants based on their own analysis and evidence generation. In the early phases of implementation, then, the focus is on gathering evidence with participants to explore the nuanced contextualised reality of WFCL, to appreciate the complexity starting with lived experience.

Questioning underlying assumptions

Accompanying the SAR design is an embedded and participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning system which is complexity-aware in its design (see Apgar et al. 2019), providing the mechanisms for systematic data collection, sensemaking and use of learning as understanding evolves and change unfolds. Through iterative and reflexive use of theory of change across scales (whole of programme, intervention and activity level) the intention is to make testing starting assumptions explicit and use structured learning moments to collectively reflect on our evolving understanding about the lived reality of children engaged in WFCL. This approach has been shown to support learning within a contribution analysis impact evaluation design (Apgar, Hernandez and Ton, 2020).

The intentional learning design responds to critiques of adaptive management becomingly simply another development fad at a time when there is an explosion of deceptively similar approaches (e.g. Shutt 2016, Prieto Martin, Apgar and Hernandez, 2020). In particular, we acknowledge the need for adaptive decision making to listen carefully to lived reality of change processes of children and other stakeholders enmeshed in the complex dynamics at play (e.g. Yanguas, 2018) and we build on the distinction made by Green and Guijt (2019) of interconnected levels of learning and decision-making in what we call a people-centred approach (see Apgar et al. 2020 for full design details).

The intention is to go beyond using learning on the surface, to deepen learning as the complexity of dynamics in the system that produces WFCL are revealed. This requires moving from the important yet relatively straight forward single-loop learning about what we are doing to ensure we are being operationally efficient and effective with our actions, towards the more challenging double-loop learning. Double-loop learning in the context of adaptive programming is about revisiting the assumptions we hold – asking questions about whether we are in fact doing the right things. For us this means asking ourselves: what are we learning about the nature of WFCL in particular contexts? what are we learning about our own conceptualisation of WFCL and the dynamics of supply chains? what are we learning about how our implementation strategy is responding to the complex reality of WFCL? how might we need to shift our focus and strategies to ensure we are responding to and navigating complexity rather than ignoring it? (Argyris and Schon 1992; Ramaligan et al 2009). Asking these deeper questions is critical if the programme is to walk the walk of being complexity aware, to shine a light on the hidden spaces of WFCL to uncover the drivers that push and pull children into harmful work and evidence how the participatory interventions produce locally relevant and systemic solutions.

Early experiences of being complexity-aware

At the time of writing, in 2021, the programme was in its third year of operation. As shown in Figure 1, we began with a ten-month inception phase, during which Consortium partners built upon the initially proposed structure of four broadly defined areas of research and intervention workstreams (social protection, supply chains, children's agency and social norms) through using in country scoping as well as the evidence gaps identified in a systematic literature review on modern slavery and child labour (Oosterhoff et al. 2018). This was followed by a one-year set-up phase that enabled greater contextualisation of the programme design and the selection of locations and types of interventions, deepening the understanding of the reality of WFCL in selected locations, and building capacity of operational teams in country. The first year of implementation was severely disrupted by covid-19, yet despite the challenges, research initiated through: the participatory collection of 800 life stories of children engaged in WFCL; neighbourhood mapping; supply chain mapping; a slum census and baseline survey all feeding into intervention designs, and a crystallisation of the programme's evolved research agenda around core research and evaluation questions (see Burns, Apgar and Raw 2021 for full design).

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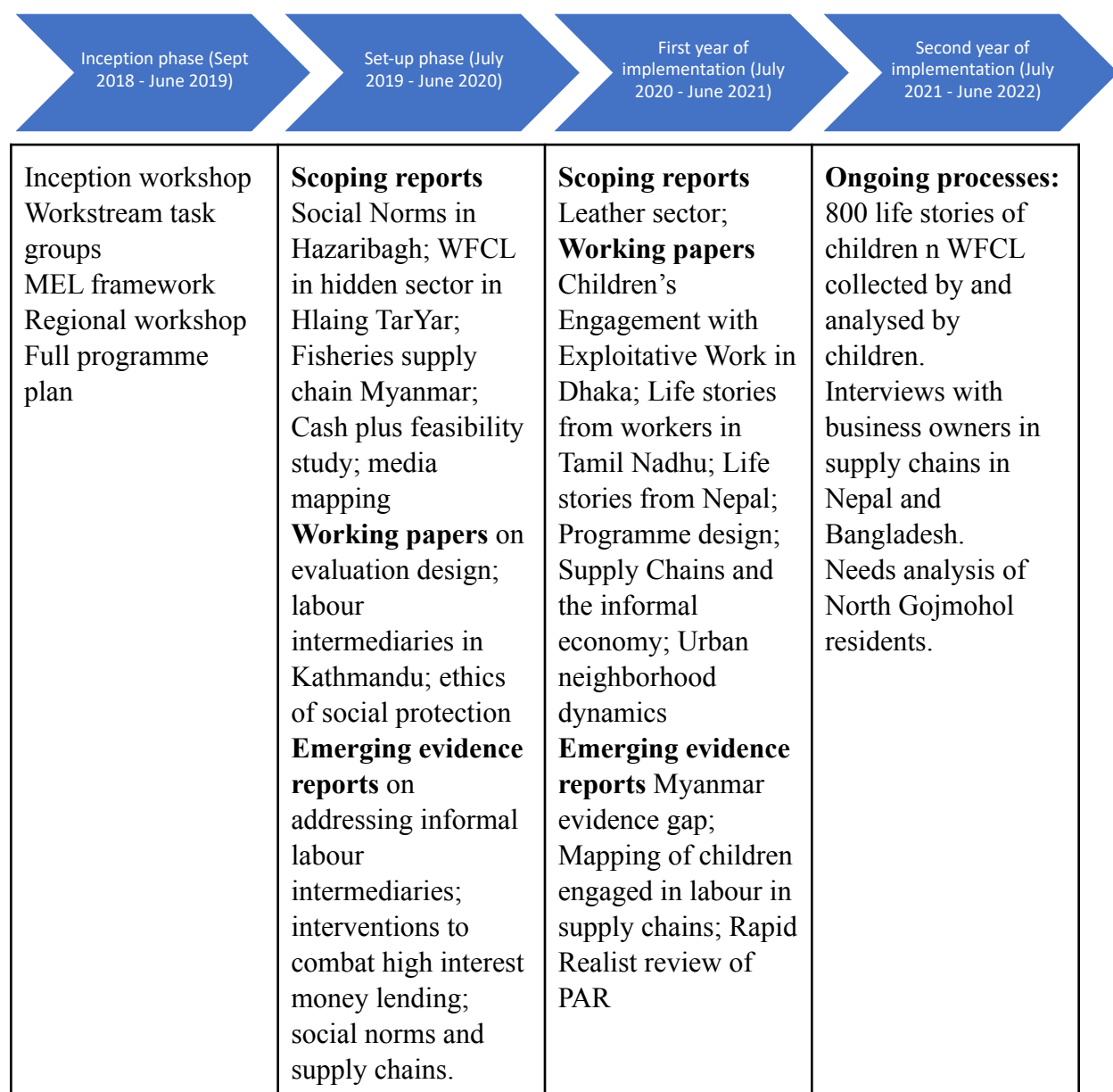


Figure 1. Early phases of CLARISSA project and main outputs generated

In the period of June – November 2021, 800 life stories of children in WFCL were collected by children. The life stories are triggered by a single prompt question and so are open ended. Selected children were then supported to analyse these by identifying critical causal factors, and linking them by creating causal system maps, working from each story to eventually produce a large collective system map (see Burns 2021 for full view of methodology). These systems maps have generated child-led evidence of the systems dynamics for 100 or more experiences gathered in each location. The full systems dynamics, rather than just fragmented answers to researcher generated questions (such as please tell me about your experiences of going to school, and why you dropped out) have led to

identification of key causal dynamics where children now see potential to intervene – the leverage points into systems change.

In Nepal children then prioritised which dynamics identified through their analysis they wish to work with through engagement in participatory action research (PAR) groups. Some of the themes they prioritised include the causal dynamic of children ending up in exploitative work in the adult entertainment sector through accepting jobs brokered by trusted intermediaries including family members; and addiction and conflict within families leading to children needing to enter exploitative work.

These ‘issues’ which represent causal dynamics identified by working children will now become the themes for PAR groups, and children will be supported to do further evidence gathering around the issue, their own further analysis to identify actions they and others in the system can take in response. Each of these locally specific actions will have a theory of change and assumptions about how the children imagine change might happen. Each group will engage in their own reflection and evaluation of their actions to learn about their interventions influence systems dynamics.

While these and other participatory processes are yet to bear fruit, we are already experiencing how the intentional learning design is enabling our own questioning of assumptions through use of early evidence from the scoping, mapping and engagement with stakeholders (such as the children’s life stories). Next, we share the opportunities we’ve had to fundamentally rethink and reshape the programme in response to a more nuanced understanding of the reality of working children and the systems they are part of.

Reframing the issue – from corporate brands to informal and domestic markets

One of our starting assumptions was that our greatest leverage for change around WFCL was to surface hidden child labour within the supply chains of corporate brands, and engage them in dialogue, and in action research processes, to generate solutions. The programme had initially engaged an organisation that had relationships with global brands assuming that the ownership built by corporate actors of both the problem and solutions through engaging them in analysis would incentivize solution seeking behaviour. However, less than a year into the programme, by the time we had our first all partner regional planning event in Bangkok in 2018, we were already beginning to challenge this assumption.

Once we had identified key sectors (leather production in Bangladesh, and the provision of adult entertainment in Nepal) through mapping and scoping in country, the premise that we had started with, that labour in the informal sector, in the further reaches of supply chains was hidden, was challenged. Engaging more directly in the neighbourhoods through transect walks in Hazaribagh, the traditional leather production area in Dhaka, it was possible to see hundreds of children working in the hot sunlight, working at night, carrying heavy loads, using dangerous tools and cutting machines, and working with chemicals. We realised that the visibility of children in WFCL is not the issue. The visibility of the dynamics which bring those children into WFCL and the links to different markets and supply chain is what remains hidden. Through further scoping into the supply chain (Moktadir and Bashar

2021 forthcoming; AK Maksud, 2021) we found that the WFCL were not mostly to be found in the formal sector supplying brands within global supply chains, but rather in tens of thousands of small family businesses which predominantly operate in the informal sectors, often supplying domestic and regional markets, but also seasonally supplying more formal markets to meet gaps in demand.

Better understanding these dynamics led to revisiting the communications into, for example, dialogues around the 2021 year for the elimination of child labour. Our early messaging has focused on communicating that while working with thousands of small businesses is much harder than working with critical actors in corporate supply chains and or governments, it is what the sector needs to turn its attention to, alongside work with corporate brands. The task is apparently infinite in its scope, it will require building movement-based change rather than convincing senior management, and there are very few if any good models of how to do it. Yet, however difficult this is, it is critical to focus on where the real problem lies rather than what is easy to engage with. This is not to say that corporates cleaning up their supply chains will not have an important long-term influence, or that policy and enforcement measures are unnecessary, but that in the medium term both will be marginal in their impact because they barely touch the drivers (both push and pull factors) that incentivise WFCL in the informal sector. The challenge that we face is not so much that no one has noticed that WFCL is substantially perpetuated in the informal domains, rather that because engagement with these multiple actors seems so complex, that most organisations and institutions choose to invest their time and resources where they think they might see measurable results. Yet it is only if we are looking at and working in the right place that we have any chance of building positive responses to the actual problem.

Refining the entry points – from informal businesses to the micro dynamics in urban spaces

Reframing of the issue towards informal, domestic and regional markets in Bangladesh thus required a refining of entry points for the programme's participatory processes as interventions. We realised that in order to create change at the level of individual businesses, participants of action research groups would need to understand the dynamics of small businesses in the focus sectors at a much more granular level. We would need to understand the complexity of business-to-business transactions, money flows between businesses, lending patterns, advances and obligations, and other such dynamics that exist at multiple stages within a supply chain.

This might have led us to focus solely on the informal, but we were simultaneously confronted by the siloed conceptualisation of formal and informal workplaces – which did not reflect the reality which was being uncovered by the teams on the ground (Aked, 2021). In both the Bangladesh leather supply chain, and the Nepal adult entertainment sector the formal and informal are often interwoven. People running formal businesses are simultaneously running informal businesses, and/or are dependent on informal businesses.

The grey spaces in between them and their interdependencies seems to be what facilitates or lubricates both the formal and informal work.

What also became clear was the need to situate participatory interventions within an emergent understanding of the urban dynamics of the informal neighbourhoods that the WFCL existed within and was constitutive of. There are very few studies of micro level dynamics of WFCL in urban settings (Kasper, 2021). While triggers such as health crises (which lead to high interest loans) are common across urban and rural areas, in rural locations, the constituent populations, local social norms, and economic opportunities available to families tend to be more homogeneous. In urban areas, however, there is a huge diversity of ethnicities, work opportunities can spring up in multiple sectors and there is a complex web of underground mafia type activities. These far more complex urban dynamics that lead to WFCL are not yet well understood.

This led to new questions about the ways in which urban dynamics fuel WFCL, such as: how do neighbourhood social norms govern decisions about children's work? how does the spatial infrastructure impact on hazardous work? what are the local power relations which govern work? The scoping studies have shown that children have to work in polluted environments - ranging from traffic fumes to working amid toxic waste, they work on rubbish tips resulting from dumping of urban waste; they carry heavy loads upstairs in high rise buildings, and they work in transport and construction related to city growth. To tackle child labour in the city it was going to be critical to understand these dynamics. The programmatic response has been to build a process of participatory GIS mapping into the intervention design, such that we can keep building a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and identify leverage points for action research to respond.

Reconceptualising the system – from supply chain to human chain

The initial workstream on supply chains, conceptualised as a focus on revealing and reducing harm to children in supply chains, was a useful starting point for engaging in the leather sector in Bangladesh, and as discussed already, enabled a reframing towards the grey areas of connected formal and informal domains. In the case of the adult entertainment sector in Nepal, however, the supply chain model did not fit reality. This became obvious early on, and in the same workshop in Bangkok in 2018 when we challenged our assumptions about focusing on corporate brands, we were also challenged as to how to best conceptualise the relationships and patterns that drive children into the adult entertainment sector in Kathmandu valley.

In this context, we were looking at the provision of 'services' where the child was either 'service provider' or indeed the 'commodity' itself. The pathway of the child and the way that she moved through different forms of work seemed to provide a clearer explanation of the dynamics. This led to the formulation of a conceptual framework around what was called the 'human chain' (Social Norms Working Group, CLARISSA 2020). This new way of conceptualising the system of focus has enabled interaction with the actual dynamics of what is going on.

The ‘human chain’ was conceptualised in relation to the pathways taken by the child through different forms of child labour, some of which are ‘worst forms’ and the ‘*social networks that enable and facilitate children’s pathways into, within, and out of the worst forms of child labour*’ (Social Norms Working Group, CLARISSA 2020). Specific findings from the early scoping work in Nepal on social norms, labour intermediaries and trajectories of children into the adult entertainment sector (Oosterhoff & Hacker, 2020) that inform this approach highlighted amongst other key factors that we needed to take into account the ways in which complex social networks and mobile phone technology mediate the pathways that children take. Further, it is diverse labour intermediaries, many based on kinship ties, blurring formal and informal relationships and building a picture of a mosaic of actors, some working in unpredictable ways that should be the focus. This in turn requires a much more nuanced understanding of who are victims and who are perpetrators, as the motivations of key people and their overlapping roles prove dichotomous views of who is ‘good’ and who is ‘bad’ in this system are often false and unhelpful. Furthermore, recently conducted interviews with leather sector business owners have revealed that a substantial proportion were formerly child labourers doing the very work that they are now employing other children to do. Having created their own business it is not hard to see how they might see the employment of children as providing them with opportunities (A.K Maksud et al, 2021). Having reconceptualised this work around the idea of human chains, the participatory work which follows will seek to understand how these pathways work, and to build solutions out of this knowledge.

Manifestations of the complexity of WFCL

The above examples illustrate how we have reframed the issue, refined entry points and parameters for our participatory interventions and reconceptualised the system all in response to new understandings and intentional use of learning. Through this journey of learning, we are able already to highlight five manifestations of complexity of WFCL in supply and human chains that have implications for ongoing programme design.

Being mindful of unintended consequences of interventions

Using a detailed focus on the micro-dynamics of WFCL in guiding participatory responses, calls for investigation into the feedback loops that might result in unintended consequences in what are seemingly obvious responses. For example, we might assume livelihood initiatives could support some families to come out of poverty because families could start their own businesses. However, these new businesses are precisely the types of businesses that already exist and are likely to mirror the thousands of family businesses which already draw children into WFCL. In other words, if the supply chain dynamics mean that profit margins are so low then any new business is likely to replicate the survival strategies that already exist.

Similarly, education initiatives which encourage families to send some of their children to school may put more pressure on other children in the family to work in WFCL to pay for the costs of education and mitigate the effects of some young householders not bringing income into the family. At a policy level we could already observe the way in which efforts by the Bangladesh government to move the formal sector to new modern units in Hemayetpur and away from the historical centre of informal leather production in Hazaribagh, has resulted in the creation of new informal settlements developing around the formal production units. Economic drivers create a demand for informal work to feed the formal work, because the margins within the formal work sector are so fine that manufacturers can't make a profit without subcontracting.

Exploring multi-layered processes in the whole chain

Our scoping studies found that WFCL in the leather sector exists in 104 of the 107 processes mapped. Long and complex supply chains mean extremely tight profit margins for all actors in the chains. Understanding how the system of child labour works requires inquiry across all stages of the supply chain. Further, understanding the complex role that loans and credit play in mediating the risks to businesses up and down the chain is important. A crisis, or a gap in demand, high levels of local competition, and other such dynamics can trigger the need for business-to-business loans or the extension of credit from adjacent and connecting businesses in the supply chain. This can lower margins and/or impose restrictive obligations creating an imperative to employ children. As risk gets pushed down the supply chain, it can impact at every level. Consequently, to understand how the imperative to employ children in WFCL is generated, it is necessary to understand how these pressures cascade down the chain. We don't yet know how this system of loans, obligations and dependencies work, and this will be a core part of ongoing participatory research through engaging directly with a selection of small businesses in order to fully understand how they work. Moreover, three action research groups of business owners in different geographical locations in each country will explore how to support sustainable businesses which don't require children engaging in hazardous work.

Recognising overlapping identities of perpetrators and victims

As noted already in the context of the labour intermediaries in Kathmandu, categories of victims and perpetrators are blurred across both the human and supply chains. In Dhaka, slum dwelling families and their children who are working in the leather industry, are both victims and perpetrators. If much of the WFCL is found in small family businesses, then it is people in the very same communities who are employing them. These intersecting identities that are driven by a combination of neighbourhoods and supply chain dynamics require careful navigation as we define participants for different types of action research groups.

Appreciating hidden indirect and long-term harm

The risks of working with chemicals is clear and stark, as are the effects of working 16 hours a day, working outdoors in 40 degrees, carrying heavy loads up open flights of stairs, or working with dangerous machinery. But some of the more insidious long-term physical and psychological effects are more invisible and still largely ignored. As identified by the literature review of WFCL in supply chains (Aked, 2021:13) “the harm being done to children is not obvious in the short term (ILO 2002) the fact that a lot of WFCL remains unseen in global and national data sets (Avis, 2017) and that incidences of child labour are not recorded alongside health impacts (Muntaner et al, 2010).”

The hidden long-term effects have unpredictable impacts on other aspects of the system. For example, income generators (such as parents or siblings) can no longer work after 5-10 years because of kidney disease or a mental health crisis, families are then left with no choice but to take out loans to pay their medical expenses and to compensate for the loss of income – so their children enter the workplace. When a child living in Hazaribagh (named in 2013 as the 5th most toxic location in the world⁴) walks through the streets and passages to work, they are exposed to hazards which cannot be linked to their work in a direct way, yet they also play directly and explicitly into the dynamics that facilitate WFCL.

Responding to crisis and ongoing change in complex systems

Since the inception of the programme, multiple intersecting crises have disrupted implementation – the covid-19 pandemic, a military coup in Myanmar and unexpected budget cuts as a result of reductions to the UK ODA budget. Nothing could have prepared any programme, even one that intends to be adaptive, for this level of crisis. Yet, the reality for many trapped in systems dynamics that perpetuate WFCL, shocks are not rare events, but a daily reality. These may include household level shocks like the death of a family member, or a health crisis, or community level shocks such as flooding or earthquakes or a fire in a nearby factory. In the early conceptualisation of the programme the importance of understanding the role of shocks in accelerating precarity and vulnerability was part of the framing. Our assumption was that we would understand, through the individual life stories, the ways in which children and families were forced to adapt to shocks, and this would enable us to uncover feedback loops and resulting dynamics.

We could not have predicted that a global pandemic would provide real time data about how shocks are changing neighbourhoods and supply and human chains on an unprecedented scale. The intentional adaptive design, however, does mean that we have been well placed to navigate ongoing uncertainty. Our design and ways of working – as an integrated partnership bringing multiple capacities together – has been built precisely to

⁴ As reported by <https://www.worstpolluted.org/docs/TopTenThreats2013.pdf> and <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2013/11/05/hazaribagh-named-5th-most-polluted-place-on-earth> Dhaka Tribute, November 5th, 2012

embrace the complexity in systems that we are engaging with. Operational teams in country are set up to work across multiple layers and communicate across specialised teams; we have built an intentional capacity development process as an attempt to support building technical skills as well as behavioural competencies for flexibility and reflexivity. A high-level operational adaptation in real time has helped, in the most part, to navigate ongoing shifts related to both covid-19 and reduced budgets – teams in the field have built covid safe ways of collecting life stories, and adapted methodologies to online working, including building ways to facilitate participatory methods across locations using online learning platforms such as Miro. More substantively, we have pivoted work to explicitly monitor the impacts of covid – such as children’s research groups undertaking an inquiry on “covid through the eyes of children working in WFCL”. This is not to suggest that these periods of crises have not been incredibly challenging for all involved, or that we haven’t had moments of questioning how the programme can continue, and indeed some parts have had to be radically shifted, but to illustrate that embodying complexity in design is one factor that has contributed to the programme still having a future ahead of it.

Building our adaptive competencies into the future

In reflecting on our experiences thus far and the extent to which and ways we are supporting double loop learning, we use Prieto Martin et al.’s (2017) core adaptive practices as a framework to share both progress and challenges. An effective partnership is at the heart of enabling *collaborative teamwork*. While trust has been built across the partnership and has enabled us to collectively question underlying assumptions, it requires ongoing monitoring and nurturing as different organisational structures and incentive systems are learning how and at times still struggling with working together. Working as integrated teams is new to many in the context of siloed project-based development programming. Intentionality in assessing our partnership working and supporting collective learning are useful mechanisms to continue to strengthen our collaborative teamwork.

Taking seriously that action research is the intervention has helped to shine a light on the need to *promote experiential learning* from the outset – and in this paper we have discussed what this looks like in practice. Yet deepening the learning and enabling full *contextual embeddedness* to bring the participatory aspects of adaptive programming to life has not been fully materialised in the early phase coupled with the need to work online during the pandemic. The next phase of the programme will offer opportunity to further build on the children’s own analysis of their own life stories, and we expect new rounds of questioning our assumptions to ensure we *stay focused on our values*. Ongoing reflection on the quality of our engagements, the quality of our partnership and the quality of our evidence generation is intended to continue to enact the adaptive intent we have laid out in this paper as a response to the complexity of WFCL.

Conclusion

We began with an observation of how, in the wider child labour programming sector there is a tendency to ignore the complexity of the problem and respond with pre-constructed solutions (education, livelihoods) that respond largely to easy to define and measurable variables. We propose that applying a complexity-aware approach to programming is one way to embrace rather than erase the dynamic nature of the problem, to work with it rather than against it. We described the participatory and adaptive design of an action research programme implemented through a Consortium of partners and now in its third year of operation and shared early learning. We evidenced the ways in which we have already been able to question our underlying assumptions about both the nature of WFCL and the ways in which a participatory programme can respond. As working children, their parents and guardians as well as business owners are able to build more ownership of the evidence gathering, undertaking their own analysis and ultimately designing their own responses, we expect more programmatic assumptions to be questioned and richer learning to emerge about the complex reality of WFCL.

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