

A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO EXPLORING CAUSAL PATHWAYS

Experience from the CLARISSA programme
July 2024

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Introduction

The [Child Labour Action Research in South and Southeast Asia \(CLARISSA\)](#) programme was a five-year systemic action research (SAR) programme focused on the Worst Forms of Child Labour funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (UK Aid), led by the Institute of Development Studies and implemented through a Consortium of international partners including Terre des Hommes, Child Hope, the Consortium for Street Children and in country partners working on child labour.

A problem worth addressing: The complex, systemic drivers of child labor

The starting assumption the programme responds to is that children end up in child labour because of many, often hidden, interactions between multiple actors and multiple factors within households, communities, and labour systems. These complex dynamics lead to unpredictable outcomes for children and other sector stakeholders. Knowing when and how to intervene requires a systemic approach to uncover hidden dynamics, and identify leverage points for action, yet most interventions continue to focus on protection and rescue alone or on specific thematic responses such as education instead of work, and often fail to include the lived experiences of children.

For example, in Dhaka, an extensive [slum mapping](#) found that 34.6% of children in eight slums are engaged in some form of child labour and 93.2% of these working children are engaging in exploitative child labour. In the Gajmohal slum, further [mapping of child labour](#) found children are employed by the 250 small informal leather factories and carry out hazardous processes across the supply chain. Children are involved in all of the over one hundred steps such as trading raw hides, preserving raw hides, production of glue, tanning, dyeing, drying, trading, sewing, and manufacturing.

In Kathmandu, scoping focused on the expanding [adult entertainment sector](#) (AES), which is developing in response to increased demand for entertainment from a growing urban (particularly male) population. While child labour is common in this sector, data on prevalence across many forms of labour, much of which is voluntary and hidden, is unreliable. Scoping highlighted the importance of informal recruitment strategies leading girls into the AES and the related sex industry. Both the AES sector and the pathways through which girls enter and move through different forms of work, including commercial sexual exploitation, are complex and are deeply rooted in social norms.

The CLARISSA response: Systemic Action Research and systems change interventions

The programme embraced learning, taking a [participatory adaptive approach](#) to generating both evidence and responses to the underlying system dynamics that drive children into the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) in the leather supply chain in Dhaka, Bangladesh and the AES in Kathmandu, Nepal.

CLARISSA placed a particular focus on participants’ own ‘agency’. In other words, participants’ ability to understand the situation they face through their own lived experience, and to develop and take actions in response to them through multiple forms of evidence. Most of CLARISSA’s participants are children. In this case study we focus specifically on the participatory methodologies through which working children were involved in exploring their own causal pathways in and out of different forms of work, and, in evaluating the pathways through which their own responses do, or do not open up opportunities for systemic change. Table 1 explains the three ways children were involved in causal analysis throughout the programmatic and evaluative efforts.

Table 1. When and how children were involved in causal analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of action research in response to the drivers of the worst forms of child labour

Moments children were involved in causal analysis	Participatory methods for causal analysis
Exploring the causal pathways into and drivers of the worst forms of child labour	Collection and analysis of life stories and production of systems maps
Defining and further exploring entry points for responding to causal dynamics	Action research groups (ARGs) undertake their own evidence generation to deepen their understanding of specific causal dynamics that influence child labour
Developing and evaluating actions as responses	Action research groups plan, undertake and monitor their own actions. Reflection and learning workshops build understanding of emerging outcomes and their contribution to them.

Understanding the Systemic Action Research approach

The children were involved from the outset in defining and selecting leverage points for intervening in the complex issue of hazardous child labor. They learned about causal analysis not solely as part of the evaluation, but as part of the programme's systemic intervention. It began early in the programmatic engagement, as they collected life stories of children in hazardous and exploitive work and were supported to first undertake a causal analysis of each story, and to then aggregate across into one large system map. In Bangladesh, 53 children were involved in the causal analysis of 400 stories over several workshops, leading to an understanding of the system dynamics based on children's lived experience.

Figure 1. Large system map from the neighborhood locations.



Source: Author's own

Across the sites, the children’s analysis found evidence of systems dynamics that they prioritized for further exploration and action, such as:



Family health issues and the death of parents, as well as alcoholism, leading to financial problems that precipitated the need to work, and vice versa (feedback loop).



Children who have participated in training and skills-oriented programmes provided by NGOs are re-entering child labour.



Family negligence and homelessness leading to children not having access to formal education.

From there, children worked with adults to act on their prioritized systems dynamics through a facilitated cycle of action and reflection, deepening their understanding and responses. For example, children in the Baglamukhi neighborhood of Kathmandu explored the system dynamic of *Homelessness and family negligence resulting in children not having birth and citizenship certificates*. The lack of citizenship certificates is a barrier to formal employment leading children to seek work in hazardous conditions hidden through business informality.

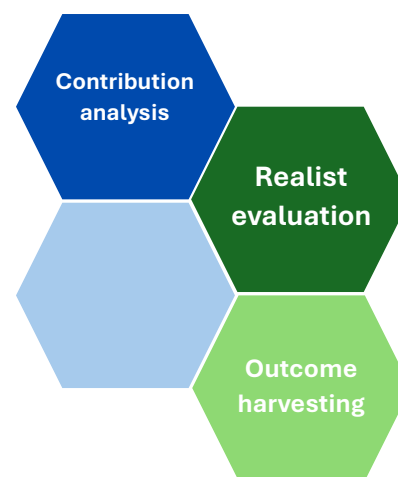
To deepen their analysis of this issue, children used photographs, videos, life-stories and interviews with children and NGO representatives. They interviewed five children and one representative from an organisation working in the field of child labour. Analyzing this evidence helped them see that the lack of citizenship documentation was directly linked to cycles of family violence and break up with children leaving home and not having access to birth certificates, and often the parents themselves also not having documentation. They further found that the lack of documentation was a barrier to accessing education and government services that can keep them off the streets. In this way children continued to deepen their causal analysis of each system dynamic.

This group then planned and helped implement actions designed to disrupt the dynamic of family violence and parental negligence through writing and performing a public drama to influence parents and the public, as well as holding targeted workshops with parents and teachers.

The participatory causal pathways evaluation

Given the complexity of child labour, the learning orientation of the programme, and the value placed on lived experience and agency of stakeholders to explore and define their own pathways to systems change, evaluation in CLARISSA was designed to build understandings of causal pathways (theories of change) as change emerges across nested levels of engagement, from micro level change through direct engagement with system actors on specific issues, to meso level change for supply chains and macro level change for the whole child labour programming system.

[Contribution analysis was chosen](#) as an overarching approach for its ability to provide both structure and flexibility in how causal theories of change are nested and explored. It emphasizes iterative use of theory of change as the programme evolves and adapts, and acknowledges multiple perspectives as central to the causal analysis required for prospective exploration of potential pathways, as well as retrospective discovery of how pathways actually take shape. The programme's modular evaluation design identified several causal hotspots and combinations of appropriate methods were selected to respond to each.



A core method was the participatory causal analysis within the action research groups - children making sense of how they influenced systems through their actions and reflections. This was then fed into a programme level evaluation using a [realist approach](#) combined with outcome harvesting to refine theory about if, for whom, and under what conditions the action research process influences the systems dynamics related to children ending up in labor.

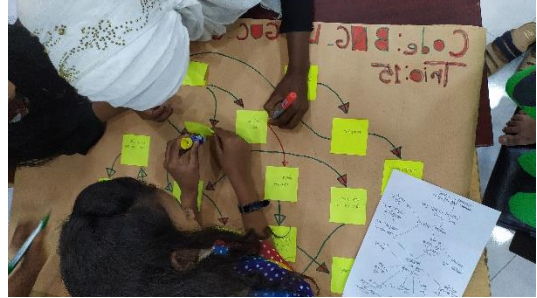
Participatory causal analysis in an evaluation “Hot spot”

One of the [causal hot spot](#) questions that the evaluation sought to answer was:

If and how involving working children and their lived experience in exploring systemic drivers and defining solutions, generates effective innovations to tackle the root causes of exploitative and harmful work.

A mix of data collection and sensemaking methods helped explore this question, using participatory methods embedded in the action research processes. The children harnessed their learnings from the actions taken.

For example, the group of children from the Congabu neighborhood in Kathmandu were working to disrupt the system dynamic of *Children re-entered into WFCL despite participating in training and skills-oriented programs provided by non-governmental non-profit organizations*. They undertook three types of actions: (1) sensitisation events at four community schools where children from low economic background were seen to be at risk of entering into child labour; (2) sharing their own findings with organisations working in adult entertainment sector locations, police, municipal offices, some of the business owners (of dance bars and spa/massage venue among others). They aimed to dialogue about possible solutions and (3) using the specific evidence on training needs to identify training opportunities that would be more impactful.



They identified a number of outcomes that resulted from the school sensitisation programme, including schools being impressed with the children’s ability to run an event which resulted in requests for further sensitisation activities by children; children undertaking cyber safety training to improve and further tailor their sensitisation programme; the formation of a permanent working group comprising of teachers and school management committee members as well as children to provide targeted support to children who are found to be at risk of ending up in hazardous labour.

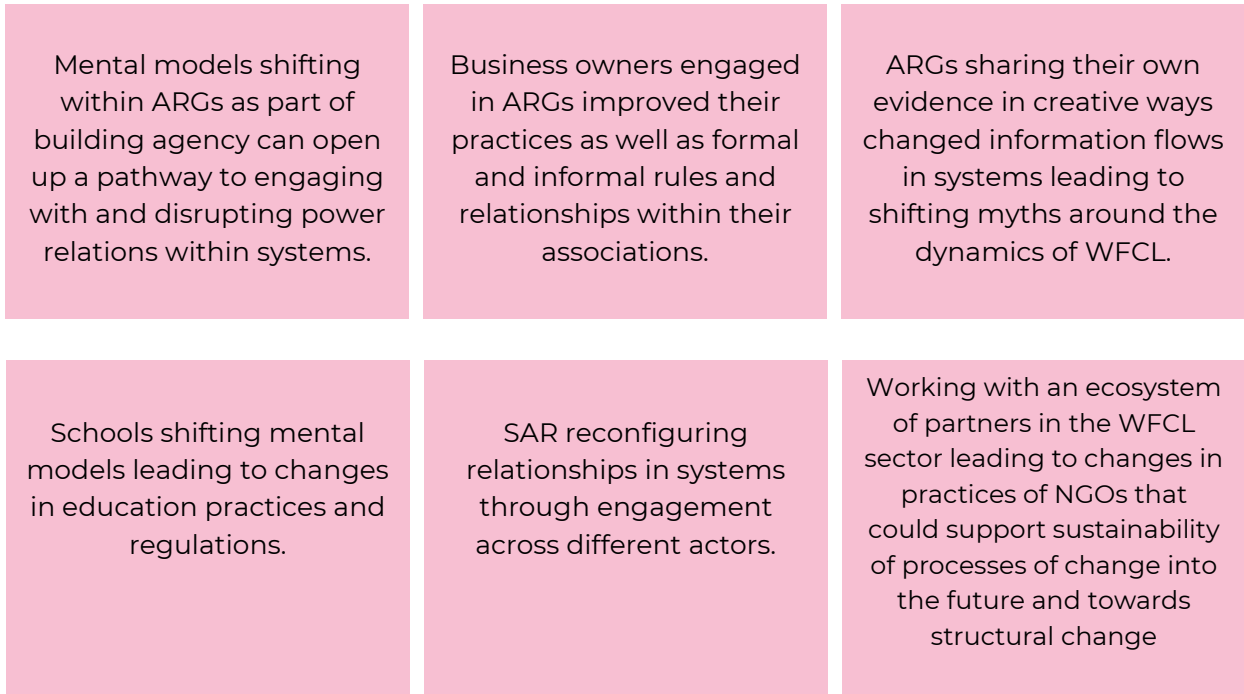
In learning workshops ,the participants analyzed the mixed attitudes of the audience that had attended their stakeholder engagement events. They found that many had displayed support and interest in collaborating to build more useful training, such as

representatives of the Municipality. They also found that some expressed criticism of the adult entertainment sector. They noted that most stakeholders had shown interest in how the children had shared their own lived experience as evidence, especially presenting their body mapping findings. They were also surprised to find that some people in powerful positions were unaware of the situation of working children and were even judgmental of them. This highlighted to the children that shifting the system dynamics requires working first to build more awareness regarding the sector as a whole.

Causal analysis for programme evaluation of CLARISSA

The evaluation brought together these very localized findings from the participating children along with additional data collection to understand if and how the systemic action research process might influence the systems dynamics related to children ending up in labor. The evaluation team used periodic outcome harvesting to describe and analyze emergent outcomes, including possible ripples from the programme activities.

For example, business owners who employed children in the adult entertainment sector in Kathmandu and the leather supply chain in Dhaka were found to have changed business practices. The causal evidence showed that orientation sessions on WFCL and legal provisions that CLARISSA implemented with the owners of night entertainment in the Koteshwor action research group led to a combination of changed business practices including recruitment practices, positive actions to change societal perceptions of their sector, and engagement with their peers (sharing information and receiving positive encouragement). Other causal pathways into shifting system dynamics that were evidenced include:



Taking action on the learnings

The evaluation's causal findings were not just interesting and important for understanding the program and its impact. They were actionable at the local level through the action research teams. They also generated knowledge that was shared across CLARISSA and beyond CLARISSA, and was used in a variety of ways, including:

- Children's involvement in both research and advocacy gave them a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics and priorities of different decision-makers and enabled them to develop specific evidence-based recommendations for change targeting local, national and international decision-makers. The experience of children challenging dominant frames also served to **highlight the value for decision-makers of consulting with those who have lived experience** of the policies and practices under review.
- Through international advocacy activities the evidence generated by CLARISSA was cited seven times in a 2024 United Nations report on the exploitation of child performers in the adult entertainment sector. It has been used to **deepen thinking on child labour** in the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and to engage with policy makers in Bangladesh and Nepal.
- The development of partners' involvement in the causal analysis and evidence generation in the programme has led **to shifting of their mental models** in terms of what children are capable of and a firm commitment to child-centered programming across the sector.
- The evidence and processes through which it was generated and shared has led to **closer relationships between Bangladesh government and NGOs** on the challenging issue of child labour.

The CLARISSA approach to integrating participatory causal approaches throughout is uncommon, yet the core practices are replicable in many settings. The methods by which the participants were engaged in developing causal pathways to guide their actions at the outset and evaluating how change really happened demonstrates the accessibility of these methods, and the importance of engaging those most affected by complex, systemic problems in making sense of how, why, and under what conditions change is really happening.

Learn More

- To learn more about the CLARISSA project overall, please visit the [main website](#).
- To explore the other examples of CLARISSA's action research approach, please visit the project's [research site](#).
- To learn more about CLARISSA's evaluation approach and findings please visit the [evaluation site](#).
- To learn more about the practice of Systemic Action Research have a look at [People-driven solutions: a practitioners resource](#)
- To learn more about the causal pathways approach specifically, please access the supplement to this case study.

Acknowledgements

The processes that are described in this case study are the result of the work of the CLARISSA implementation team and all of the children, young adults, business owners and many others engaged as co-researchers and agents of change over four years. The CLARISSA MEL team, including Mieke Snijder, Sukanta Paul, Shanta Kakri, Forhad Uddin, Helen Veicht and Pedro Prieto Martin were central to designing and facilitating the causal analysis which is the focus of this case study. We thank Carolina De La Rosa Mateo for her support with formatting and design of the paper.