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Accessing Newly Accreted Land by the Poor Farmers: Innovations Toward Food Security in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh has an estimated 1723 square kilometers of newly accreted lands, locally known as char land, emerging from water in the major river systems and the Bay of Bengal. Bulk of these lands is located throughout the banks of Brahmaputra / Teesta river system in the North and along the southern coastal districts of the country. While the char lands in the inland river systems are composed of coarse sands, those in the coastal regions are made up of silt and clay. By definition, these new marginal lands belong to the government, but in reality these are occupied, accessed or used by settlers in the vicinity of these chars for sandbar cropping and food crops. In a land scarce country like Bangladesh where average farmsize is hardly 0.5 hectare with one-fifth of rural households being functionally landless, the main importance of these lands is that the poor farmers, who are displaced settlers due to recurrent river erosion, produce food crops such as rice, maize, pumpkins, vegetables and fruits and raise livestock animals on these unfavourable lands. Access to these marginal lands does not only provide food security but also create livelihood opportunities for the extreme poor. This paper presents examples from two locations of Bangladesh, one from Rangpur chars in the North and the other from Noakhali chars in the South to illustrate the process of how the poor get access and retain their access to these lands, and how the conflicts over ownership or use rights to lands are resolved through the community participation facilitated by the local government authorities, land record department, agricultural extension services, local elites, land holders, settlers, national and international NGOs and private sectors. This will also reflect on improved management of land through changing cropping patterns, adoption of new technology, farmers' training, soil salinity in coastal chars, social forestry, and homestead gardening for household food security. Finally, this paper will highlight important policy options for char land management, research - extension - farmer linkages, technology dissemination, product supply chain development, and potential areas of collaborative research for best use of char lands.

Keywords: Accessing land, char land, community participation, land record, sandbar cropping