

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



Sattar Mandal¹, Matthias Kleinke², Nazmul Chowdhury³, Nirmal Bepary⁴

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations- Bangladesh, Senior Advisor

² Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Life Sciences, Germany

^{3 & 4} Practical Action Bangladesh, Extreme Poverty Programme, Bangladesh



Plots, Poor and Pumpkins

Bangladesh has an estimated 1723 square kilometers of newly accreted lands, locally known as char land along the banks of Brahmaputra / Teesta river system in the North and along the southern coastal districts of the country. These transitional char lands in the inland river systems are composed of coarse sands and by definition these belong to the government, but in reality these are occupied, accessed or used by settlers in the vicinity of these chars for sandbar cropping of food crops. 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 'unusable' lands. Accessing to these marginal lands provides food security and livelihood opportunities for the extreme poor.



Figure 1: Land reappearing after floods



Figure 2: Land negotiation meeting



Figure 3: Gathered for digging pits



Figure 4: Digging pits



Figure 5: Watering young plants



Figure 6: Pumpkins ready for harvest



Figure 7: Pumpkins carrying on shoulder bar



Figure 8: Harvested pumpkins



Figure 9: FAO & Practical Action visitors

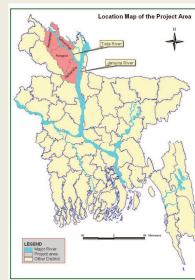


Figure 10: Map of the project area

Land negotiation process

Step-1:

Identification of sandbars by the target communities after the flood recedes.

Step-2:

Spot surveys and data collection about the current land use status i.e. whether under any productive use or left as barren sand bars.

Step-3:

Pre-selection of sandbar spots, listing the landless farmers and collecting information about claimant land owners.

Step-4:

Informal sharing with local government authorities, UP chairmen and members.

Step-5:

Organizing land negotiation workshop with local gov. representatives, land owners, local residents and beneficiaries for operational access to sandbar areas/spots. Objectives and innovations of pumpkin production are explained and opinions of the participants sought. When everyone agrees, project team adopts a no objection resolution for the season with local gov. representatives and local elites as witness to agreement. Resolution is signed by all participants.

Step-6:

The project team organizes another workshop at Upazila/district level with Upazila and district administration i.e. District Commissioner/ADC/AC land and line department (Agriculture Extension, Livestock, Fisheries), journalists and targeted project beneficiaries for sharing the resolution approving operational access of the poor to sandbar spots. Additionally, resolutions are also mooted for legal and administrative support as and when necessary.

Step-7:

Launch digging of sand pits. Farmers' access continues if the land appears in the same locations in the following years

Observations:

Initially, 'land owners' do not claim any return- cash or kind. However, when they see the results i.e. pumpkins growing, some land owners demand very little share of the crop (e.g. 10 pumpkins). In some cases, few land owners claim very little lease value @Tk. 1000-1500 (\$12-20) per 30 decimals (about 1/3 of an acre).

Conclusions and Call for Cooperation

Sandbar cropping has brought food security and livelihoods for the extreme poor in northern Bangladesh as well as useful knowledge for future programming of extreme poverty reduction projects. Identifying new technological innovations involving the extreme poor presents immense potential for graduating them from extreme poverty situation.

However, this action research shows sandbar cropping has impending challenges i.e. increased competition and bargaining for such lands, and support for technology, credit and marketing of pumpkins. Ensuring continued access of the extreme poor to sandbars should be a policy priority of the government in line with its on-going poverty reduction programs.

These initiatives call for development support and research collaboration for upscaling sand bar cropping technologies, collective bargaining strengths and capacity building of the poor, diversified cropping on sand bars, and developing market linkages for sand bar products.