

CHAR DEVELOPMENT AND SETTLEMENT PROJECT PHASE IV (CDSP IV)

Securing access to land and water for food security

“The tight interconnections between water, energy and land make clear that the management of each of them cannot be considered in isolation, but must be seen as part of an integrated system.” - European Report on Development, 2012

Sustainable poverty reduction needs to start with ensuring access to natural resources – land, water, fish stocks, forests etc. – for those who need them the most, the rural poor. The poor people, who have the least access to natural resources and are at the same time entirely reliant on them for their livelihoods, are also very vulnerable to climate change, natural stocks, and seasonal food deficits. Moreover, with little ability to accumulate assets they also need longer time to recover from natural disasters.

Projects designed for improving water management or agricultural development, which are then expected to reduce poverty and improve food security often tend to take access to land and water for granted, assuming that everyone has access, one way or another. Yet this is not so. In a country like Bangladesh, population increase, economic growth and urbanization are putting pressure on agricultural land leading to fragmentation of landholdings, landlessness and land increasingly being diverted for use for non-agricultural purposes. Not only land, but also water has become an increasingly ‘scarce’ resource. Rapid growth in domestic and industrial water demand, as well as climate change, increased unpredictability in rainfall patterns and water pollution, have equally put pressure on water resources across much of Bangladesh.

The central part of the coastal zone of Bangladesh, however, provides a rather unique and substantial outlet for releasing some of this immense pressure on land and water in the country. It is in this geographic region, called the Meghna Estuary, where the mighty Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Rivers flow into the Bay of Bengal. It is a constantly changing area. Satellite pictures show that each year approximately 32 km² of land is being eroded in the estuary. However, at the same time new land is being formed of about 52 km² as a result of sedimentation. Consequently, there is an annual net accretion of around 20 km².¹ With an assumed density of 800 people per km², each year approximately 26,000 people (about 4500 households) lose their land in the estuary, but many of them move to these newly emerged lands, or *chars*, as these are called in Bangla (pronounce: ‘chor’).

By law, the newly accreted land belongs to the government and is transferred to the Forest Department for a period of 20 years. The Forest Department plants trees, especially mangroves, to stabilize the land and protect it against storms. But given the high demand for land, many river erosion stricken families start occupying the land before it has officially been declared open for settlement.

In these newly formed *char* areas living conditions are harsh. The area is difficult to access; it can only be reached by boat or on foot. The settlers are highly exposed to the vagaries of nature and due to tidal movements; the low lying land gets flooded regularly. Government institutions are absent. So are basic health and social services. Agricultural inputs are hard to come by. There is no access to drinking water in the dry season. Last but not least, the occupation of the land is illegal. In some cases the settlers are even forced to ‘buy’ their land from local power brokers (*bahini*), who hold the land just as illegally. In areas where these *bahini*’s are active, there is rampant lawlessness, looting and extortion. Families with little or no savings are thus pushed to an extremely marginal

¹ De Wilde, K. (ed.) Moving coastlines. Emergence and use of land in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna estuary. The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2011, p. 28

existence. Without any documents legalizing their claims to the land they cultivate, the settler families do not know if they can stay, and, do not invest in the land.



Dutch expertise in flood protection, drainage and land reclamation has been a mainstay in Dutch development cooperation with Bangladesh. One such project is the Char Development and Settlement Project IV (CDSP IV). It is the fourth in a row of successful projects in EKN Dhaka's water management portfolio implemented in the deltaic coastal region of Bangladesh. Poverty reduction and food Security are its overall objectives. CDSP I started in 1994 and was implemented over a period of five years. The project covered three polders in Noakhali District. At the Government's request, CDSP II (1995-2005) followed in *char* areas in Laksmipur, Noakhali, Feni and Chittagong Districts. Then CDSP III (2005-2011) was implemented again in Noakhali and Laksmipur Districts. The first three CDSP projects were entirely funded by EKN.

CDSP IV is jointly financed by the Government of Bangladesh, the Government of the Netherlands and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Fast Facts of CDSP IV:

- **Objective:** to reduce poverty and hunger among poor people living in newly accreted chars.
- **Activities:** flood protection & drainage, natural hazard-resilient infrastructure, land settlement and titling, livelihood support, institutional development, studies and survey (see below).
- **Implementing agencies:** Bangladesh Water Development Board, Ministry of Land, Local Government Engineering Department, Department of Public Health Engineering, Department of Agricultural Extension, Forest Department and four NGO's.
- **Total area of char land to be developed:** 30,000 hectares
- **Total number of beneficiaries:** 155,000 people in 28,000 households.
- **Total cost of the project:** USD 89.2 million
- **Project duration:** 2011-2017

CDSP follows the Integrated Coast Zone Management approach, a multi-sector, multi-agency programmatic approach ensuring effective management of the six main project components which are:

(1) Flood protection & drainage with Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and Forest Department as partners. This includes the construction of embankments, drainage sluices and channels as well as closures. Water management groups are formed to operate and maintain this infrastructure. Trees are planted on mud flats, foreshores and embankments to provide protection against flood and also generate income for Social Forestry Groups.

(2) Construction of natural hazards-resilient infrastructure with Ministry of Land, Local Government Engineering Department, Department of Public Health Engineering as partners. This includes building roads, bridges, culverts, cyclone shelters cum schools accompanied by deep tube wells, hygienic latrines and *killa's* (cyclone refuges for livestock). Lesson learnt from previous projects indicate that the population are less likely to seek shelter during cyclones if they fear losing their livestock, either to natural disasters or looting at the time of chaos. The project also builds markets, boat landing *ghats*, bus stands and *Upazila* (subdistrict) offices. The infrastructure will improve communication both inside the chars as well as with the outside world and will increase access to markets and to government and private services.

(3) Land settlement and titling with Ministry of Land and four NGO's as partners. Each settler family will be allotted a land title to 0.6 hectare of land. The process starts with a survey to identify farm plots and their current occupiers. The project leads the administrative process for the official registration of the land titles. The previous phases of the project confirmed that families will invest in solidly built houses, high yielding crop varieties and land management if they get land titles. Over the years, CDSP has simplified the process of land titling by reducing the number of 26 steps to only 8. Successful innovations introduced in previous project phases are public hearings to confirm which households are landless, registering the land title in both the wife's and the husband's name and the use of an electronic land record management system.

(4) Livelihood support with the Department of Agricultural Extension, Forest Department and four NGO's as partners. Farmers are organized and trained to make better use of their land and other resources. Farmer forums are established and programs to promote agricultural technologies that are adapted to saline conditions and resilient to climate change are implemented. Four NGO's are providing micro-finance services, training on income-generating activities, disaster management, awareness raising on legal rights, and extension of health and family planning services.



(5) Field level institutions with Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), Local Government Engineering Department, Department of Public Health Engineering, Department of Agricultural Extension, Forest Department and 4 NGO's as partners. Project interventions are planned and implemented in conjunction with community based groups such as Water Management, Social Forestry, Micro-Finance and Tube Well User groups. After the completion of the project, the infrastructure operation and maintenance is officially handed over to these groups. All groups are required to ensure equal male-female participation.

(6) Surveys and Studies, operation and maintenance. The project continues to support some operation and maintenance and land settlement activities of CDSP I, II and III. Feasibility studies are undertaken to identify and preliminarily formulate programmes for future interventions in the coastal char areas.

The strong focus on the integration of the different approaches in addressing the multi-dimensional aspects of achieving poverty reduction and food security makes this project stand out among the many single-sector projects

dealing with poverty reduction and food security elsewhere in the country. The Dutch technical assistance team ensures the integration and coordination of the activities of the different ministries and departments of the Bangladesh Government in the project area.

A field visit to the project area by the EKN's food security team in August 2013 focused on the direct and indirect outcome of the project's multi-dimensional activities and in particular of legalized formal access to land, on improving food security of the settlers in the *char* areas. During an informal meeting with the communities, people told us that they had lost their land to erosion in other areas and then moved to these chars with only the clothes on their back. After settling in the chars, however, their living conditions hardly improved. In an effort to provide for the families, the men often migrate to other areas in search of off-season work. The women and children are left behind, on their own - sometimes for years, sometimes for ever- to fend for themselves as best as they can.

Traditionally in Bangladesh, families discourage and exclude women from their entitlement to land inheritance both from their father's and their husband's side. While legally there is no restriction to female ownership of land, culturally the practice is quite the opposite. Women are not only discouraged from claiming ownership but all properties, inherited or marital, are controlled either by their husband or his family.

The project emphasizes joint ownership of the land for married couple with the wife having priority access and inheritance in case of divorce or abandonment. Once the char land is assigned, it cannot be sold, but only be inherited or passed down to the children of the couple, preventing further fraud by absconding husbands or his family. Provisions like these which serve to protect the woman's right are highly appreciated by the local community.



During the meeting, one woman in particular stood out to us. She had lost everything and moved seven times, before settling on this char nearly eight years ago. Alone with three young sons, she had struggled to provide two meals a day to her children. She lacked the financial means to afford the payments required to legalize the land that she is occupying and doubted whether the land could be registered only to her name. Her fears were assuaged at the meeting when the project people confirmed that even female headed households will be part of the process of land legalization. Knowing that she can now finally own a piece of land, she can invest, strengthen her livelihood and improve food security and nutrition for herself and her family.

In our next article on food security in Bangladesh we will focus on the importance of integrated water management for agricultural production and safe drinking water for nutrition.