

Living on new land: Char development in Bangladesh

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The coastlines of Bangladesh are constantly moving. Surveys, based on satellite images, have shown that each year there is a net accretion of around 20 km²: newly formed land of about 52 km² minus eroded land of around 32 km². With an assumed density of 800 people per km², this means that each year approximately 26,000 people lose their land. For many of them, the newly accreted land, or *chars*, as these new-emerged lands are called in Bangla, offers an alternative home. The Char Development and Settlement Project IV (CDSP IV), jointly funded by the Government of Bangladesh, IFAD and the Government of the Netherlands, works to support the women and men to build their lives on this new land.

“The living conditions on the *chars* are harsh,” explained D. K. Chowdhury, who is the technical advisor on land settlement for CDSP IV. “The land is completely inaccessible and can only be reached by boat and foot. The people living there are exposed to nature and due to the daily tides, the land gets flooded on a regular basis. There is no safe drinking water, no health service or sanitation, no agricultural inputs, no education, no legal or social structures. When occupying the land the women and men will most likely have to face the *Bahini*, local power groups, who take over the control in absence of any adequate administrative structures). These *Bahini* often press for money and take away agricultural products, livestock or other household properties.”

“A family who loses its land by erosion loses everything. There is no legal entitlement for compensation. The newly accreted land becomes property of the government [*khas* land]. The only chance a family, whose land has been washed away, has, is to receive some *khas* land from the government, often after

prolong persuasions.” Since its first phase (1994-1999), CDSP has been working to support the rural women and men occupying land on the chars to receive legal titles for these plots. The first step of this process is the production of a settlement map. During a plot-to-plot-survey (PTPS), cartographers, measure each and every plot, draw an exact map of the land by cadastral surveys and note the details on the inhabitants. The maps and the information about the families are then deposited in the Upazila [subdistrict] Land Office.



Land settlement to the landless household are conducted by the government's land offices according to the provisions of the *Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Act*. In the CDSP areas, the result of the PTPS has to be published by the Upazila Land Offices and complaints against the findings can be submitted within 30 days. "In normal land settlement processes, people have to travel 30 to 40 km to the Upazila Land Office to look into the files. Under the CDSP system, public hearings are held at the village level. During these hearings, each case is called out to confirm that the family and all listed members are living on the plot. During this process other participants can object, for example if they know that an applicant owns a plot of land somewhere else, it can be mentioned to the hearing personnel. After all, only landless households are entitled to a *khas* land settlement. Once the hearing is concluded, the list with the identified landless households is transferred to the Upazila Land Office which prepares the official resolution of the meeting as well as the settlement record for every family, which then has to sign the *Kabuliat* (deed of agreement) by both the selected landless households and the land authority. Under CDSP, the deed is registered the village level due to a special arrangement (in other cases these are done at the Upazila Offices), which saves the families time and costs for the often difficult travel to the Upazila Office.



Once registered, the details of the settlement cases are entered in the land database of the CDSP. The project has developed a Land Records Management System (LRMS), which allows keeping record of every land attribution and helps preservation of the permanent records and preventing double assignments. The LRMS produces computerized *Khatians* (final records of right) and finally this document is handed over to the beneficiary, making them the owner of the respective plot on a permanent base, meaning that it cannot be sold.

"Another thing that CDSP has introduced to the process, is that the wife's name is written first in the legal document," D. K. Chowdhury said. "As a result, the wife is legally entitled to 50 per cent of the total land. This strengthens her position in the family and gives her uninterrupted access to the land and a legal position for the women in many decision making processes, for example if the family wants to use the land as a collateral for credit, selection of crops for cultivation, etc. Also, if the husband should abuse his wife or it is proven that he is involved in illegal activities, than there will be legal steps toward him. As a result, he can even lose his share of land. This improves the gender empowerment in these backward areas."

When we visited Caring Char (one of the five chars being developed under CDSP IV) last week, we met one of the 3 teams currently conducting the PTPS. Using traditional cadastral survey methods to draw an exact maps on different segments of the 12,000 ha large char, they had just started to measure the plot of Nayan Begum, who came to Caring Char 7 years ago with her husband and children from Hatiya, a close by island. They bought a share of land from a man who had occupied a plot and even though they paid for the land they're now living on, it doesn't belong to them in the legal sense. "We don't know for sure if we can stay here," Nayan said. "But now that the settlement process has started, we are a bit more optimistic. Once we own the plot, we can finally start investing in the land."



Aleyuna Bala Das and her family have already received the title for their land. They live on Boyer Char, which has been project area under CDSP III. 15 years ago, they had to leave their home at Hatiya. "The river took most of our land, only a part of the house was left. But during high tide, everything got flooded. We couldn't stay there." So they decided to move to Boyer Char, where they bought some land from *Bahini*. The plot they received, was jungle land and not yet suitable for agriculture. They left the children with relatives; during the day, her husband would sell the wood they found on the plot and she would work as agricultural laborer for other farmers. During the night hours, they cleaned the land. "We were often afraid of the *Bahini*, who constantly asked for more money or took away the little we owned," she remembered. "It was difficult, but we wanted to build a good future for the children. And there was nowhere else to go." It took them two years to clean the land and prepare it for agricultural production. In 2008, they received the official land title. Since then, they have exchanged the simple straw hut for a solid built house and have invested in high-yielding crops. "Before CDSP came to this area there were no roads and no markets. We had only local varieties that were often not delivering the highest output. This has changed" said her husband Sankar Chandra Das. "Also, the *Bahini* left the area, so we can safely continue to build up our lives here."

“Under CDSP we have introduced a number of innovative activities in land management systems to ensure the titling of the land in an open, transparent and hassle free process, so that the land can be used for the welfare and economic development of the respective family on a permanent basis,” explained D. K. Chowdhury. “These can be scaled-up in other parts of the country as well.”



CDSP IV is applying an integrated development approach, to improve the economic situation and living conditions on the Chars. In addition to the land rights activities, six implementing agencies, four NGOs and a technical assistance team work closely together to strengthen protection from climate change, build climate resilient infrastructure, provide livelihood support, such as health services and legal education, and support the establishment of field-level institutions. The current phase of the project is running until 2017 and is expected to directly benefit 28,000 households.