



Trees Provide Income and Preserve Land in Pakistan

A sustainable livelihood project in Pakistan is boosting poor farmers' income and protecting their land from erosion.



Under the ADB-funded Sustainable Livelihood in Barani Areas Project, farmers in Punjab province are growing trees, such as eucalyptus, as a cash crop on rain-fed lands. Photo: Mohammad Ismail Khan/ADB.

In Rahdari village in Punjab's Khushab district, farmers have taken up growing trees as a cash crop on barani, or rain-fed lands, where yields were often uncertain and usually poor.

"It's like a bank account but with a difference," says a beaming Ramzan, 36, referring to the trees he planted 5 years ago on half a hectare of land. "You water the trees and see them grow every day. And when you need the cash, you cut the tree and sell the wood."

"A friend of mine has bought a car by selling wood and now earns money from the car by using it as a taxi," added Ramzan. "Many other families that I know are now able to send their children to school thanks to the additional income provided by the trees."

This was not always the case. Parts of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, suffer frequent droughts and low crop yields. Not long ago, the Khushab district was a barren land threatened by the advancing desert where wood was a rare commodity. An ADB project, however, has been literally planting seeds of change in the area. The results are now plain for all to see.

Changing the barani landscape

Loss of productive land to water and wind erosion often threatened the food security of villagers in Punjab. Widespread loss of shrub and vegetation in the sandy pastures also made livestock production challenging.

Against such a dismal backdrop, an ADB project presented a community-based development model, involving the communities and government and non-government organizations as implementers. The goal of the Sustainable Livelihood in Barani Areas Project was to raise the quality of life of the poorest and most vulnerable families in the targeted areas.

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of land for planting trees. This practice not only stabilizes the sand dunes, but also gives them cash and food security."

- Ghulam Rasool, regional manager of the National Rural Support Program

years ago. I was astonished to see the barren land except for some bushes and old trees, locally called kagali, here and there. It was like a treeless plateau that came to life once a year when and if it rained," says Ghulam Rasool, regional manager of the National Rural Support Program. Rasool is from the Hunza region in the northern most part of Pakistan, an equally dry but mountainous region where communities religiously plant and protect trees as life-nourishing assets.

"But now every family sets aside a piece of land for planting trees. This practice not only stabilizes the sand dunes, but also gives them cash and food security," he says, pointing to the rows of eucalyptus across the rolling sand dunes.

Villagers along the Chenab-Jhelum link canal in Noorpur Thal, Khushab district benefited in particular from planting eucalyptus. Ground water level had risen after the canal was built about a decade ago in the sandy region. Eucalyptus, a fast-growing and water-consuming plant, helped keep the water table down for over 26,000 farmers in waterlogged areas. The farmers planted saplings on more than 2,000 hectares of sandy fields and shelter beds.

"Planting trees on 1 acre saved 5 acres of land (about 2 hectares). Besides, the income these plants are providing are vital for me and my family," says 82-year-old farmer Allah Yar, who is now sick and unable to work in the fields. His son sold some trees for 29 thousand rupees to buy medicine for Yar and other needs of the family.

A lucrative venture

When the project was launched in 2004, the 10 barani districts had a population of 3.2 million in its 2,500 villages, spanning 200 local administrative units called the union council. At that time, about 47% of the people were living below the poverty line and around 50% of the children above 5 years old had never been to school.

The community forestry initiative now earns about \$1 million a year, mainly through the sale of eucalyptus to local wood traders who sell to them to different users, including the construction, matchstick, and paper-making industries. The wood is also being used to make logs, brushes, and pulps.

The plantations have increased fodder supply for cattle. Many villagers also use the wood as fuel for heating in winter and for cooking purposes. Following the project's success, villagers planted more than 1,000 hectares with their own resources in the Noorpur Thal area alone. Many of these have been leased to the matchstick and pulp industry as captive plantations.

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