Agriculture in Bangladesh’s northwest region could not keep farmers out of poverty despite the fact that all available lands are being cultivated and cropping intensity is already at 175%.

To improve the livelihood of small farmers in the region, the Northwest Crop Diversification Project provided them with credit and information on high-value crops, and improved their links to markets.

The project successfully increased farmers’ incomes and empowered the women in agricultural communities.

Challenges

Bangladesh’s northwest region is among the poorest in the country; over 60% of its population fall below the poverty line. People rely mainly on agriculture for livelihood; non-farm employment opportunities are few and the development of trade, services, and industries are sparse.

Agriculture in the region is traditionally rice-based, involving mainly small farmers with holdings of less than 1 hectare. All available land is used for cultivation and cropping intensity is already at 175%. As such, the farmers cannot look to expansion or intensification of traditional crops to increase meager incomes.

Despite agriculture’s failure to provide better incomes for farmers, the region is actually well-suited for it. It has fertile soils, ample ground and surface water resources, varied climate favorable to a range of crops, and a relatively flat terrain. In fact, an Asian Development Bank study has pointed out the region’s potential for cultivating high-value crops given this favorable agronomic environment. The same study said this potential was boosted by the completion of the Jamuna bridge, which ended the region’s isolation from the rest of Bangladesh, opened markets in Dhaka and other urban centers, and enhanced access to modern agricultural inputs.

Approach

In 2000, ADB approved the Northwest Crop Diversification Project to help households switch to more lucrative crops and, in the process, increase their incomes. The project adopted the following approaches:

Building knowledge of high-value crops. Roughly 200,000 farmers were informed of the merits and care of high-value crops, of which 33 were identified for project support, including potatoes, maize, cabbages, tomatoes, country beans, spinach, okra, pumpkins, cucumbers, mangoes, tamarind, ginger, and onions.

Supporting credit and farmer mobilization. Roughly $25 million in credit were channeled to some 180,000 farmers by nongovernment organizations involved in the project, i.e., Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Grameen Krishi Foundation, PROSHIKA, and Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service Bangladesh. The credit allowed the farmers to invest in high-value crops and newer technology. The nongovernment organizations also facilitated the formation of farmer groups for training and credit.

Enriching market links. The project improved market access roads and constructed covered sales, storage, and loading/unloading facilities. It also helped establish market groups to organize the sale and transport of goods locally as well as to Dhaka and other major cities.

1 Cropping intensity is the fraction of the arable area that is harvested; it may exceed 100% where more than one crop is harvested each year.
3 High-value crops are crops that provide higher net returns per hectare to the farmer than high yielding winter rice. These may include hybrid maize, potatoes, vegetables, spices, and fruits.
4 With ADB assistance via Loan 1487-BAN: Jamuna Bridge.
Empowering women. More than 10% of households in the project area were headed by women. The project ensured they were given access to training, information, and credit programs. Weekly meetings were also held in various villages to enable the women to discuss their enterprises, pay back loans, and talk about other concerns.

**Results**

Today, spinach, mangoes, ginger, and a vast array of other vegetables, fruits, and spices are turning around the lives of poor farmers and their families in northwestern Bangladesh. About 250,000 small farmers, roughly half of them women, are now producing crops that can earn more than even high-yielding varieties of *boro* (winter) rice.

“This is a model project and through it we wanted to show other small-scale farmers how to cultivate many different crops that can help them earn extra income,” said Abu Hanif Miah, project director of the Northwest Crop Diversification Project.

Added 25-year-old Hazera Begum, a member of the marketing group in Niyamatpur village, “I have already paid back initial loans of 30,000 taka (US$430), which is what I used to produce eggplants, spinach, country beans, and other vegetables. We have a far better life now with the extra income.”

Through an integrative approach, the Northwest Crop Diversification Project showed the way by giving back the small and powerless a voice and a future.

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