



THE ST ANDREWS PRIZE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

May 2013

Bangladesh: Transforming lands, transforming lives

The project comprises the demonstration and widespread adoption of 'sandbar cropping' in five districts of North West Bangladesh, which transforms barren landscapes and mini deserts into productive green fields.

This innovative, simple and cost-effective technology transforms silted barren lands created by flooding thereby helping thousands of displaced and extremely poor families surviving on the edge of mighty rivers to escape from poverty and hunger.

The project has been designed to benefit some 32,000 households and 160,000 family members, whose villages and farms have been lost through river erosion in NW Bangladesh and who are forced to live on flood protection embankments.

Riverbank erosion leads to permanent loss of land for cultivation and shelter, with communities living in areas where basic services such as safe water, sanitation, health and education are minimal or non-existent. Communications are also extremely poor. Ill health, malnourishment and mortality rates for women and children are significantly higher than for the rest of the country. The remoteness of the locations and the complexity of the problems result in a high degree of social marginalisation, child labour, exploitation, girl marriage, early pregnancies and violation of human rights. Women and children are the most vulnerable, often left to fend for themselves with no alternative livelihood options, lack of basic services and institutional support, and men off in search of employment.

After each rainy season, large sand islands appear in the main rivers of NW Bangladesh. These lands although common property, have not been used for any productive purpose. The project has successfully demonstrated that growing pumpkins in small compost pits dug into the sand is both possible and profitable. Large-scale irrigation is not necessary as the land is close to river channels. Since 2005, over 10,000 beneficiaries, many of whom are women, have produced 55,000 MT of pumpkins worth over £5m, and the technology is now spreading to new areas.

The pumpkins produced on the sandbars can be stored for over a year, greatly assisting poor households with income generation and food security particularly in the lean season.

The technology is low risk and extremely simple and had not been applied until first experimentation in 2005. It can also be easily replicated in other parts of the world where similar conditions exist.

In Bangladesh, over 200,000 displaced communities are currently living on flood protection embankments.

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Farm trials of agricultural production on sandbars have shown a positive and high impact on the poor, displaced communities, and the provision of opportunities for food production in barren lands, decent income, asset generation, increased food consumption and improved nutrition.

Additionally, the production, processing and marketing chain which has been established has resulted in pumpkins reaching over a million consumers throughout the country.

Other economic features include low labour intensity with only 20-25 work days required over five months for training, pit preparation, sowing, caring, irrigation and guarding. A community-led market system has been developed, allowing farmers to sell the pumpkins to distant locations in the country. The project provides major benefits to the poor in the first year with only seeds and irrigation support required in subsequent years. Farm management by the community or beneficiary household leads to long-term sustainability.



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Digging pumpkin pits



A happy harvest



Carrying pumpkins for storage



The project gives hope to the landless



Placing pumpkins under the sand for protection



The project team with harvested pumpkins