TECHNICAL REPORT

ON

LEARNING ROUTE “EXPERIENCE OF VEGETABLE VILLAGE;
A LIVELIHOOD IMPROVEMENT BEST PRACTICE OF HILIP”

30 MARCH TO 01 APRIL, 2016

SUNAMGANJ DISTRICT

AN EXPERIENCE IN BANGLADESH
Executive Summary
Introduction

Bangladesh is a highly populated country with lots of opportunity to use its manpower in productive activities and transform it from burden to strength. Many public, private and public-private partnership initiatives are working in the country supporting the vulnerable and poor people to find the most suitable opportunity for them and to attain a better and stronger pathway.

To identify and scale up the successful and innovative approaches and techniques used by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) funded projects in Bangladesh PROCASUR Corporation has been working in partnership with INAFI Bangladesh from June 2013. Under the frame of ROUTASIA programme with IFAD, PROCASUR is supporting knowledge management and capacity building strategies for scaling-up best practices and innovations for poverty reduction among IFAD stakeholders in the Asia and Pacific Region. Learning Route is a methodology used by PROCASUR to scale up the practices and solutions which have been proven innovative and successful in impacting the lives of poor among a greater population.

INAFI and PROCASUR in 2014 identified and documented 7 case studies from 4 IFAD-supported projects in Bangladesh. A 5-day Learning Route (LR) was also organized on 2 case studies of Finance for Enterprise Development and Employment Creation (FEDEC), one of the IFAD projects. Monitoring and evaluations and policy level staff from 6 IFAD projects joined the LR at Satkhira and Jessore as participants. INAFI-PROCASUR partnership through this process has been recognized as an expert technical assistance provider in advanced knowledge management and knowledge sharing in Bangladesh which is an opportunity for the other ongoing IFAD projects in the country to use for their capacity development.

Stimulated by the successful results, one of the now ongoing projects of IFAD, Haor Infrastructure and Livelihood Improvement Project (HILIP) of LGED, approached to enter in a new partnership with INAFI Bangladesh and PROCASUR Corporation to enhance their knowledge management capacity. In close consultation of HILIP, INAFI and PROCASUR identified the case of Vegetable Village of Radhanagar, Sunamganj for documentation and scaling up. Based on a 5 day systematization process in the field INAFI has documented the case portraying and analyzing the experience, enabling and disabling factors, best practices and lessons learned from the vegetable cultivation in Radhanagar, Sunamganj of HILIP. A 3-day Learning Route “Experience of Vegetable Village; a Livelihood Improvement Best Practice of HILIP” was organised by INAFI and PROCASUR with the support from HILIP, LGED, at Sunamganj focusing on the case.

The Project

HILIP is a project of Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), one of the largest public sector organizations in Bangladesh under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development & Cooperatives. This project of LGED is unique in a way that works not only for infrastructure development but also for improving the living standards and reducing the vulnerability of the poor living in the community. HILIP also assists a supplementary project of IFAD named Climate Adaptation and Livelihood Protection (CALIP) which works for building community and ecological resilience to climate change. The implementation period of the project is from January 2012 to June 2019.
Haor Infrastructure and Livelihood Improvement Project (HILIP) is working in the 5 north-eastern haor basin districts of the country namely Brahmanbaria, Hobiganj, Kishoreganj, Netrokona and Sunamganj covering 165 unions of 28 upazilas, which are geographically subject to extensive annual flooding. The project is designed to operate under 5 comprehensive components with the objective to improve living standards and reduce vulnerability of the poor by promoting (i) enhanced access to markets, livelihood opportunities and social services, (ii) enhanced village mobility, reduction in production losses and protection against extreme weather events, (iii) enhanced access to fishery resources and conservation of biodiversity and (iv) enhanced production, diversification and marketing of crop and livestock produce.

Under its Livelihood Protection component, HILIP is mobilizing people and promoting modern techniques of crops, poultry, livestock and fisheries among them and providing overall support towards this. HILIP since its inception has formed 1890 Common Interest Groups (CIG) for its livelihood activities including 19026 male and 27476 female members. One of these CIGs is Radahanagar Crop CIG located at a small and remote village, Radhanagar of Sunamganj.

**Learning Route**

The Learning Route “Experience of Vegetable Village; a Livelihood Improvement Best Practice of HILIP” was built on the story of introduction and substantial expansion of vegetable cultivation in the fallow land of haor region. The 3-day Learning Route from 30th March to 01st April took place at Sunamganj and offered the participants an opportunity to learn directly from the case of Radhanagar vegetable production. The case reflects inclusive approach of the project towards livelihood improvement through providing support at each level of vegetable production starting from input level and stretching up to marketing level with trainings, demonstrations, technology transfer, building forward and backward linkage and continuous technical support.

HILIP prioritized to scaling up the case within the project. It selected Progressive Farmers, Livelihood Coordinators and Social Organizers from each of its 5 working districts to participate in the LR.

**The Case**

Radahanagar village is one of the very typical villages of Derai upazilla comprising vast pieces of fallow land located in the district of Sunamganj in Bangladesh. If we look back, we would see people of this village cultivating Boro rice once a year in low lands and Aus rice in the higher land during the early rainy season and remaining under employed
throughout rest of the year. Women of the area were totally engaged with their household jobs and men were the only wage earner of the family.

Just in 3 years after the intervention of HILIP in the area, the scenario has changed showing strongly inspiring impacts not only to the lives of the people but also to the community as a whole. In Radhanagar, HILIP has introduced vegetable production in the fallow lands through developing common interest groups. People now can utilize their land mostly around the year with diversified vegetables. The income as well as profit they are earning from cultivating High Yielding Variety and Hybrid vegetables is significantly higher compared to rice paddy cultivation. Farmers now have strong linkage with all of the stakeholders they need to communicate with. Ranging from big to small; all farmers have access to market information. Based on circumstances they often practice group cultivation and group marketing to minimize their risks and costs. In addition, HILIP is promoting organic vegetable and this has also added value to their produce in the market. The village now has become known as ‘Vegetable Village’ due to the rapid expansion of vegetable cultivation by the villagers within a very short period of time.

Beginning of the Route

The Learning Route started with an inaugural session graced by the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Sunamganj as the Chief Guest and Executive Engineer, LGED, Sunamganj as Chair. During the session the background of the partnership among PROCASUR Corporation, IFAD, INAFI and HILIP and the context and objective of the Learning were briefed. All were also updated regarding the insights of Radahanagar case and why it has been chosen for scaling up. The working session of the 1st day included introduction of the participants through an interactive exercise. After that participants from each district in a group, made presentation on their professional experiences with the project. Through the presentations they shared among all about their activities, best practices in their area which they think have potential to be scaled up, challenges they face, and their expectations from the LR.

Some common challenges they face include:

Challenges:

Innovation:

Getting into the Experience of Vegetable Village:

On the 2nd day 15 CIG and 6 non-CIG vegetable farmers from Radhanagar participated in the LR. The day went through different types of exercises with the farmers from Radhanagar. After the inaugural session three host farmers shared three presentations portraying 3 aspects of their story of vegetable cultivation.

a) Timeline map: Mizanur Rahman, one of the progressive CIG farmers presented the map. He described the gradual changes in the agricultural activities in Radhanagar from rice cultivation to vegetable farming with significant improvement in the livelihood of the people throughout the years. The timeline map displayed the scenario before the project’s intervention and then showed the development step by step up to till date.

b) Map of actors: Lucky is one of the non-CIG farmers from Radhanagar who presented the relationship of all the actors involved in the vegetable value chain in Radhanagar through this map. The map clearly depicted how all the actors are linked to each other and how they add value to the total value chain.
Lessons learned from vegetable cultivation under HILIP: Dhon mia, another progressive farmer and member of the Radhanagar Crop CIG presented a list of lessons learned from their experience under this project. Some of the lessons learned from the list are as follows:

- Vegetable cultivation is more profitable compared to rice paddy cultivation. Income from vegetable cultivation is about 10 fold to that of rice cultivation.
- In the village we choose to grow different varieties of vegetable by different farmers keeping in mind not to saturate the market.
- Bamboo that is used to make platform for growing vegetable is not available in our Derai upazilla and we have to bring bamboo from another upazilla.
- With the expansion of vegetable cultivation, the price of land for lease is going higher.
- When taking the vegetables to the market we have to carry those from field to a distance through a mud built road which is very difficult and costly.
- We found that it is profitable for us to sell our produces at the arot as we get the scope to bargain with a lot of wholesale buyers there and sell our produces at a higher price.
- Demonstration plots played a significant role to make the villagers interested in vegetable production.
- Women besides the men have been involved in vegetable production which has helped to increase family income.
- Our standard of living has increased. Many of us have used the profit money to build new home. On the other hand, many have invested that in new business like rearing poultry. We can now ensure our children to attend school. Now also we can have more vegetable for ourselves which has increased our nutrition intake.
- Women being involved with a sustainable IGA now do not have to depend on their male counterparts for money and can use their own income independently.

These three presentations were prepared during the systematization process by the involvement of a number of CIG and non-CIG host farmers of the village with the guidance of INAFL. The host farmers attended different queries came from the participants based on their presentations. The participant farmers from the 5 districts also cleared their queries with the host farmers through discussion.

The LR participants divided into three groups were taken to Radhanagar village. Each group visited one local champion’s home and farm. They got the opportunity to directly interact with the local champion and heard their story of socio economic improvements, their development of knowledge and technologies with the help of the project. They also discussed about the challenges and opportunities, coping strategies to those challenges and innovative approaches to boost efficiency.

By the end of the day the participants done SWOT analysis based on the experience of Radhanagar. They in 3 groups analyzed the case of the vegetable cultivation and presented the group case analysis. Based on the SWOT a number of lessons learned and recommendations were also pointed out by the groups which might be valuable for the host case to review their activities as well as for the participants to imply in their own working areas.
SWOT:

From the analysis came out that, proper selection of area and farmers along with identifying suitable IGA for the area are crucial for the success of an intervention. The CIG farmers of Radhanagar were very much proactive to accept the idea of vegetable cultivation and to adopt the new technologies promoted by the project. There cooperative attitude and desire to help each other have stimulated the quick expansion of the process throughout the village. Another good practice among them is planned cultivation of different vegetables by different farmers to capture the market. They also analyze the market demand pattern beforehand and calculate the best time to cultivate any vegetable. For most of the vegetables they are using bamboo platforms. The interesting thing is that the same bamboo platform is used by the farmers for consecutive vegetable production and this can be used for about 2 years which minimizes their cost. Strong linkage of the farmers with different government and non-government service provider institutions as well as with the wholesale buyers and input sellers has established the scope of sustainability and generated confidence among the farmers. The farmers both male and female are exercising bargaining power with their produce and became use to with verifying the market price which is sign of their maturity. Radhanagar farmers are motivated to cope up with organic method of production. Bulking system & group marketing is an add-on for the small farmers limiting their cost and insecurity as well. The farmers are investing their profit in productive way.

All the participants agreed that, a big opportunity in this case is the location of the market at a convenient distance from the village and the large demand of vegetables in the market. With the engagement of a large portion of people

Recommendations:

- Developing a crop calendar will help the farmers to plan their production in a more efficient way.
- Introducing a specific crop collecting center would be of useful for both; the farmers and the buyers.
- Ensure linkage between the farmers and the MMC (Market management Committee) would be of useful for both of the parties.
- The farmers should be oriented about maintaining formal book keeping which will enhance their skill to distribute their income more effectively.
- Keeping the farmers update on new technologies through regular trainings is very important to ensure the sustainability.
- More exchange visits can be arranged which will boost up the farmer as well as will ensure regular update of knowledge.
- Promoting shathi crop (more than one crop grown at a time in the same land) cultivation which will help to generate increased income from the same piece of land and from investing same amount of labour. Such as: cultivating red spinach (lal shak) along with snake gourd (chichinga). A very few number of farmers in the village is now doing it. This practice has to be scaled up.
- The farmers should take assistance from HILIP officials when they apply for a loan from government bank like (Krishi bank).
- The project should explore for a sustainable way to ensure availability of water for irrigation during the dry season. Buried pipe can be established.
- Cooperation in transportation of vegetable which is already achieved up to a point.
- Introduction of bamboo production in the area will not only ease the availability of bamboo for the farmers but also would increase employment opportunity for the villagers. Bamboo made different types of products have a good market.
- Aware the farmers to lessen the number of middle men in market process.
- To inspire the farmers to become a member of Krishi Kotha.
in vegetable cultivation, the input sellers of the local market also ensure the availability of all types of inputs related to this in their shops. However, it is cost effective for the farmers when buying things in a large amount to go to Sunamganj market as things are much cheaper there.

The farmers cannot produce vegetable throughout the year because of the heavy rain during Kharip II season. Also there is risk of flash flood towards the end of Kharip I. However, irrigation during the dry season remains still a big challenge for farming. Canaling might be an option however; it may not be suitable for the lands which are very remote from river in the dry season. As most of the farmers prefer to produce vegetable in the land near to their house As mentioned by the farmers, the rate of lease is increasing with the increase in number of farmers interested to take the same land. Bamboo is a very important input for vegetable production used by the farmers of this area. However, it is not produced locally, where the project has scope to play a role. Another major problem shared by the local farmers during the LR is the poor condition of the road they have to use while taking their produces to the market. The positive thing is that, the project authority has noted this problem with much importance and has assured the farmers to repair the road within short possible period of time. Though most of the farmers are members of MFI, for investment purpose they prefer to take loan from krishi bank (specified government bank for agricultural loan) as the interest rate is much lower there compared to that of the MFIs’. However, the process of acquiring loan from the Krishi bank is lengthy and troublesome.

Action Plans:

The participants on the final day of the LR were grouped according to their districts and solely engaged in developing innovative action plans. Action plan is a methodology used in LR through which the participants reflect their knowledge generation from the route to use in their own fields within their project activities.

Capitalizing on the outstanding case of Radhanagar, the experience of the local champions, techniques adopted by them to accelerate the growth, challenges as well as opportunities, the participants from 5 districts came up with 5 action plans by the end of the day. They applied their knowledge to analyze and include some innovative solutions compatible for their own locality in their action plans. In their action plans the participants indicated the relevant changes, map of actors, strategic actions along with the duration and budget and the risks and mitigation strategies against adoption and practise of innovative ideas.

There was a panel of 4 personnel including representatives from LGED head office, LGED Sunamganj and INAFI Bangladesh to give feedback on the action plans. Finally, 5 action plans were presented by the 5 groups which contained innovative approaches to complement their activities in the field with significant impacts. The panel gave their constructive feedbacks on each of the action plan.

Please find the action plans in the annexure.

Lessons Learned

This was the 2nd time for INAFI Bangladesh to organize an LR. The experience was a bit different this time. The participants this time were from 5 different districts of the same project and not only the project staff but also the progressive farmers attended the LR. The farmers directly participated in designing the action plans. It was obviously a pleasure for us to gather progressive farmers of different locations under the umbrella of LR. The participant farmers were happy to participate and get the opportunity to see and analyze directly the progress of the local farmers. The analysis done by the participants on the host case was very much realistic as they all understand the
project activities very well. Also the recommendations for the host case were well stated. The action plans developed are innovative and seem quite easy to adopt with and complement their ongoing activities. As for this time, working with only one project which is in its mid-phase, INAFI’s view is that it would also be easier to follow up with the action plans.

Inviting the local government authorities added an extra value to the event. However, in some cases it was difficult to managing time prioritizing the LR sessions resulting ending up late. Some token gifts were also arranged for all the participants as part of a participatory exercise.

Conclusion

Annexure

Action Plans