



MD. JAMAL HOSSAIN

Shelling Service Provider
Datiar Char, Chilmari, Kurigram

Previously, people used to shell maize using hands. Thus, people were discouraged to cultivate more maize as it was very time consuming and difficult especially for women as they are mostly involved with post-harvesting. I purchased the first shelling machine in Datiar Char, Ulipur spending around BDT 40,000. M4C picked-up 20% of the cost and helped me to promote this service among the maize farmers. I reached break-even in the first year of operation, now I am serving more than 150 farmers. As it is very profitable and now takes only a few hours to shell, people are investing more in maize.



MST. RASHEDA BEGUM

Farmer
Shata Lashkar, Ulipur, Kurigram

3 years back, we used to get around 25 maund of maize from our 2 acres of land. At that time, we did not have access to quality seed, pesticides or weedicides. After using high-quality maize seed, improved cultivation and post-harvesting techniques, we could harvest 180 maund maize this year. Now we both are working hard to produce more next year. We have big dreams and we want to invest more in our children's future.

MD. SHAMSUL HUDA

Branch Manager, BRAC
Jatrapur, Sadar, Kurigram

We cater to both mainland and the char areas. There is a clear difference between the char and mainland borrowers. Char farmers take the SLP loan and use it for the exact activity they mention. Moreover, with continuous follow-up and market linkage activities, they can make good profit from cultivation or livestock rearing, and thus, can easily repay the money. Till now, the recovery rate is 100 percent. We disbursed BDT 1.12million loan to 392 loanee as Seasonal Loan Product. Last year, I won the 'Best Performer' award in my organisation, and received several performance bonuses with it.



MOSSIRON BEGUM

Livestock Farmer
Haatbari Char, Gaibandha

I borrowed BDT 30,000 from SKS last year and invested the money in bull-fattening. After 6 months I sold it and used the profit with another loan from SKS to buy two cows. In this way, I now have some money in hand which I can contribute to my family as well as I can buy things I want.



Rural Development and Cooperatives Division
Ministry of LGRD & Cooperatives

Mandated by



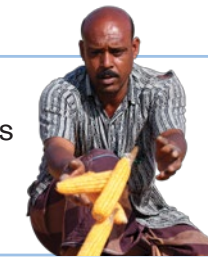
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Char Fazlulpur

Villagers step towards
brighter future
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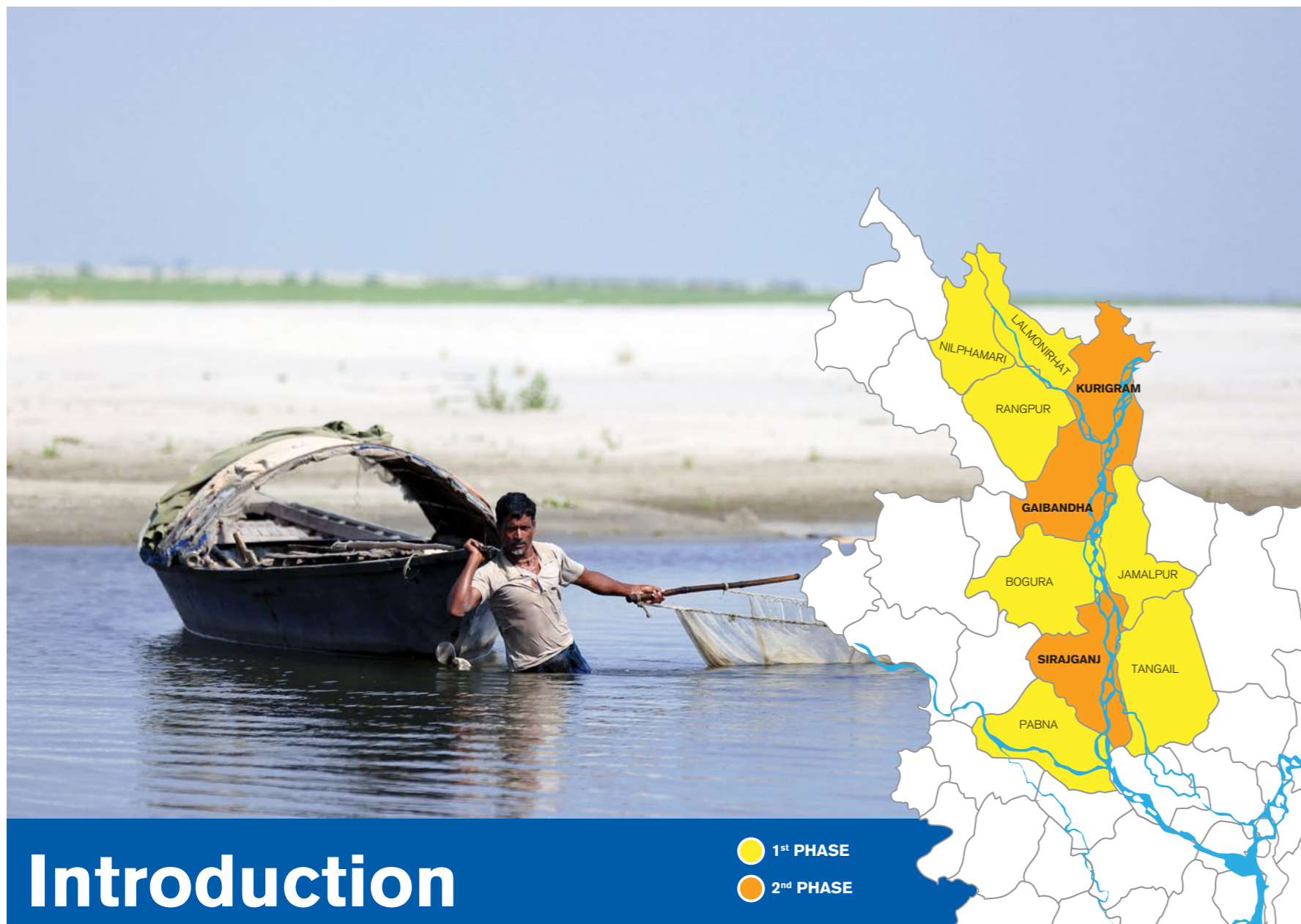
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Making
MARKETS
Work for the
Jamuna, Padma and Teesta
CHARS
(M4C)

Implemented by





Introduction

● 1st PHASE
● 2nd PHASE

Swisscontact, Swiss Foundation for Technical Cooperation, is headquartered in Zurich and was founded in 1959 by leading figures from the Swiss private sector and Swiss universities. It is exclusively involved in international cooperation and since 1961 has carried out its own and mandated projects. In Bangladesh, Swisscontact is registered as an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) under NGO Affairs Bureau, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Swisscontact has been implementing various development projects in areas of skills development (ASTHA, B-SkillFUL, Sudokkho, Utoron), SME promotion (M4C), financial services (Sarathi), and resource efficiency (AREE) from its office at House 19, Road 11, Baridhara, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh. Making Markets Work for the Jamuna, Padma and Teesta Chars (M4C) is a project mandated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives,

Government of Bangladesh. The Ministry of LGRD and Cooperatives is responsible for poverty reduction and socio-economic improvement of the poor people living in rural areas of Bangladesh through rural development, cooperative based activities and research on rural development. Moreover, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is Switzerland's international cooperation agency within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). In Bangladesh, as per the organisation's two-fold mandate of working with poor and disadvantaged people i.e. women and working in hard to reach (HTR) and vulnerable context i.e. disaster prone, has led SDC to invest in promoting inclusive economic development within the northern chars of the country.

M4C's aim is to reduce poverty and vulnerability of char households by facilitating market systems that enhance opportunities for income generation. Swisscontact in collaboration with Rural Development Academy, Bogura continue to

implement M4C in Gaibandha, Sirajganj and Kurigram districts until December 2019. A team of dedicated project staff supported by implementing partners (local NGOs) manage implementation of project activities in the field.

More than two million people live in northern chars of Bangladesh who mainly depend on agriculture (crops,

livestock) and seasonal labour opportunities for their livelihoods. Weak market institutions, lack of information and higher costs of operation make the chars "less attractive" destination for public and private investment. Building local market institutions and enhancing private and public services to improve the economic conditions of the char dwellers is therefore central to M4C's



approach. Until June 2016, it has benefited 92,000 char households in ten districts of northern Bangladesh with an additional income of BDT 11,000/households.

M4C focuses on three major intervention areas namely input supply and production services; output market and post-harvest/processing

services; and financial services targeting both crops and livestock farming households. Through time-bound partnerships, M4C supports public agencies (i.e. research, extension), private companies (i.e. agro-input, agro-processing, financial institutions), and local market actors (i.e. retailers, traders) to expand to peripheral char markets and to

promote their products and services. M4C addresses cross-cutting themes like Women Economic Empowerment (WEE), Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), Governance and Conflict-Sensitive Programme Management (CSPM) in project design and implementation. M4C also supports Char Development Research Centre (CDRC), a specialised centre of Rural Development Academy,

Bogura dedicated for improving the livelihoods of the char dwellers, to institutionalise information, knowledge and lessons of M4C; this is to create awareness, and mobilise initiatives and investments from public and private sector, beyond the project period.

Specific Achievements



Agro-input Market

- 50+ new agro-input distributors and 500+ retailers set-up by agro-input companies
- BDT 5.0 Crore sales growth of quality agro-inputs (target 10 Crore)
- 20-50% increase in yield; 12% increase in cultivation area



Agro-output Market

- 300+ traders trained and linked to high quality-high price markets
- 200+ local service providers supported to provide post-harvest/processing services
- 10-25% increase in price

Financial Services

- 5 (M)FI Branches set up on the chars; 20 branches currently offering seasonal loans
- 9,800 Farmers received and repaid loans in time
- BDT 35.0 Crore loan (BDT 30.0 Crore seasonal loan) disbursed during 2014-2017



Transportation Services

- BDT 5.0 Crore funding from LGED (14 Passenger sheds and 06 Roads)
- BDT 0.9 Crore funding from the project (09 Floating landing stations; 18 Charer Gari; 28 Model boats; 02 Unpaved Roads)

Handicrafts

- 1,000 char women trained and employed
- BDT 1,100 additional income earned per month



Story of Char Fazlulpur Villagers Step Towards Brighter Future

Dreaming of a better life might seem to be one of the most basic human activities. For the villagers of remote Char Fazlulpur union in Gaibandha of northern Bangladesh even to dream was a luxury. Residents of the underdeveloped community of islands set in the midst of the rapacious Jamuna River were so consumed by daily struggle they couldn't imagine improvement. There was no chance to dream.

With the introduction of more modern agricultural practices and farming advice given by agricultural officers facilitated by M4C, the situation has changed. Higher crop yields and better incomes mean that villagers are now able to plan their own futures.

"They don't teach science in the school at Fazlulpur," says mother and small-scale farmer Sazeda Begum, "so I sent my son to Fulchhari High School on the mainland. It costs Tk 5,000 per month for his study." A few years ago Sazeda, who farms alongside her husband, struggled simply to feed her family. It was beyond imagination to consider the quality of her son's education.

The family used to get no more than Tk 2,000 per maund for their chillies. Following the new method the price jumped to Tk 6,000 per maund for their crop.

"One of the best things the M4C people taught us was how to process crops after harvest," she recalls. "We used to dry red chillies on the ground or on the tin roof of our home, which made the crop dirty or spotted. They showed us how to use a plastic sheet which keeps the crop in prime condition."

To reach the islands of Char Fazlulpur union from the mainland is a two-hour journey by boat. The boatman can easily describe the hardship faced by people who live there. Every year there is monsoonal flood; sometimes an entire island is swallowed by the river. Erosion is a constant menace and the story of villagers losing everything, being forced to relocate and start over, is a common one. Bangladesh has achieved significant development since its independence in 1971, but the fate of river island dwellers has hardly changed.

Khatiamari is one of Char Fazlulpur's seventeen villages, an area where M4C has been active for the last three years. There, abundant crops, mostly of maize and chillies, can be seen. The landscape is less barren than elsewhere. Moreover, the houses of corrugated tin are most often accompanied with a solar panel atop the roof, a sure indication of a healthy economy.

Like Sazeda, Khatiamari villager Badiuzzaman is making good profit from chillies. M4C coordinated with the Bogura-based Spice Research Centre to train islanders about improved chilli seed retention techniques.

"They demonstrated how to purify the chilli, how to select the good plants and separate them from other plants with a mosquito net," he says. "Now all of the chillies from my field are of large size. Before I could produce no more than five maunds per bigha; now I expect ten to twelve." "From our forefathers we learnt traditional agriculture methods," says Sahajuddin, 58, an elderly farmer from nearby Chandan Char village, which has also benefited from M4C's work. "We had no knowledge of which crops were more suitable for our land. We didn't know about high yield varieties. Then M4C arranged training for us."

Indeed Sahajuddin remembers that many local farmers used to grind their own maize crop to eat as an alternative to rice. "But last year, after our training,



"With maize, for example," he recounts, "we used to scatter seeds in the field randomly and depend upon fate to produce a harvest, without caring for the crop at all. We never got more than 10 maunds of maize per bigha of land. It was hard to sell the maize in the market due to its low quality."

I cultivated maize on two bighas," he continues. "The harvest was 90 maunds which I sold for Tk 550 per maund. Traders even came to my house to buy the crop directly. Economic conditions in our community are better now."

Asked how he managed to increase his production, Sahajuddin says he uses a high yielding variety of maize of a well-known seed company and follow modern agricultural practices with his new knowledge of fertilisers



and pesticides. "We sow the maize seed with a gap of about ten inches between seeds and a gap of thirty inches between rows. Using this method the results are very good," he says.

Similar improvements have occurred in jute production. Local farmers have seen an increase in yield from around five maunds per bigha of jute to about twelve. By covering the soaking jute in plastic during processing, the fibre looks cleaner which means a higher price for farmers. Moreover, the economic situation has not only improved for farmers but has given rise to new opportunities as well. "Nobody thought to run a maize

thrashing machine in Char Fazlulpur," says Shamsheer Ali from Osmanpur village. "The M4C people encouraged me to purchase one, costing around Tk 100,000, and they helped with some of the cost.

Now I roam village to village thrashing maize for Tk 15 per maund." Shamsheer Ali's new venture earns him around Tk 80,000 over the

"Actually the M4C project didn't give us any tangible asset," says farmer Sahajuddin.

"But in connecting islanders with agricultural companies and experts, in training us, they did so much more. The knowledge they gave will remain with us forever."

three-month harvest season. "Seeing my success two other villagers bought machines on their own," he says.

Alongir Hossain, an agricultural input product dealer from Fazlulpur village has also marked the change. "Reputed companies never visited our islands.



They were unaware of our community's agricultural potential," he says. "But the M4C staff encouraged them to supply seeds, micro-fertilisers and crop protection solutions here. Nowadays local farmers are also aware that if they use quality seeds and the right agriculture products, they benefit."

Higher yields have also given rise to wholesaling opportunities. "Last season I purchased 456 tonnes of maize from the villages and on-sold them to larger traders," says local Md Yunus Ali. "I could make more profit if there was a road on our island as transportation

of our goods to the mainland by horse cart and boat is difficult. M4C has already made a low-cost floating landing station on the mainland side, which has helped. We would benefit if they built one for the island too."

A few short years ago, it was difficult for Char Fazlulpur islanders to dream. Nowadays it seems everybody has plans. "I saved money for the last three years," says Sirina Begum from Khatiamari. "I've purchased some land on the mainland. If the river's erosion continues to affect us we'll have somewhere to move to."

Some villagers installed solar electricity. Some repaired their homes. Sirina is not alone in having bought land across the river. Plans for the future, it seems, have become as plentiful in Char Fazlulpur's as crops.

"Actually the M4C project didn't give us any tangible asset," says farmer Sahajuddin. "But in connecting islanders with agricultural companies and experts, in training us, they did so much more. The knowledge they gave will remain with us forever."



New Maize Makes Kalpana Happy

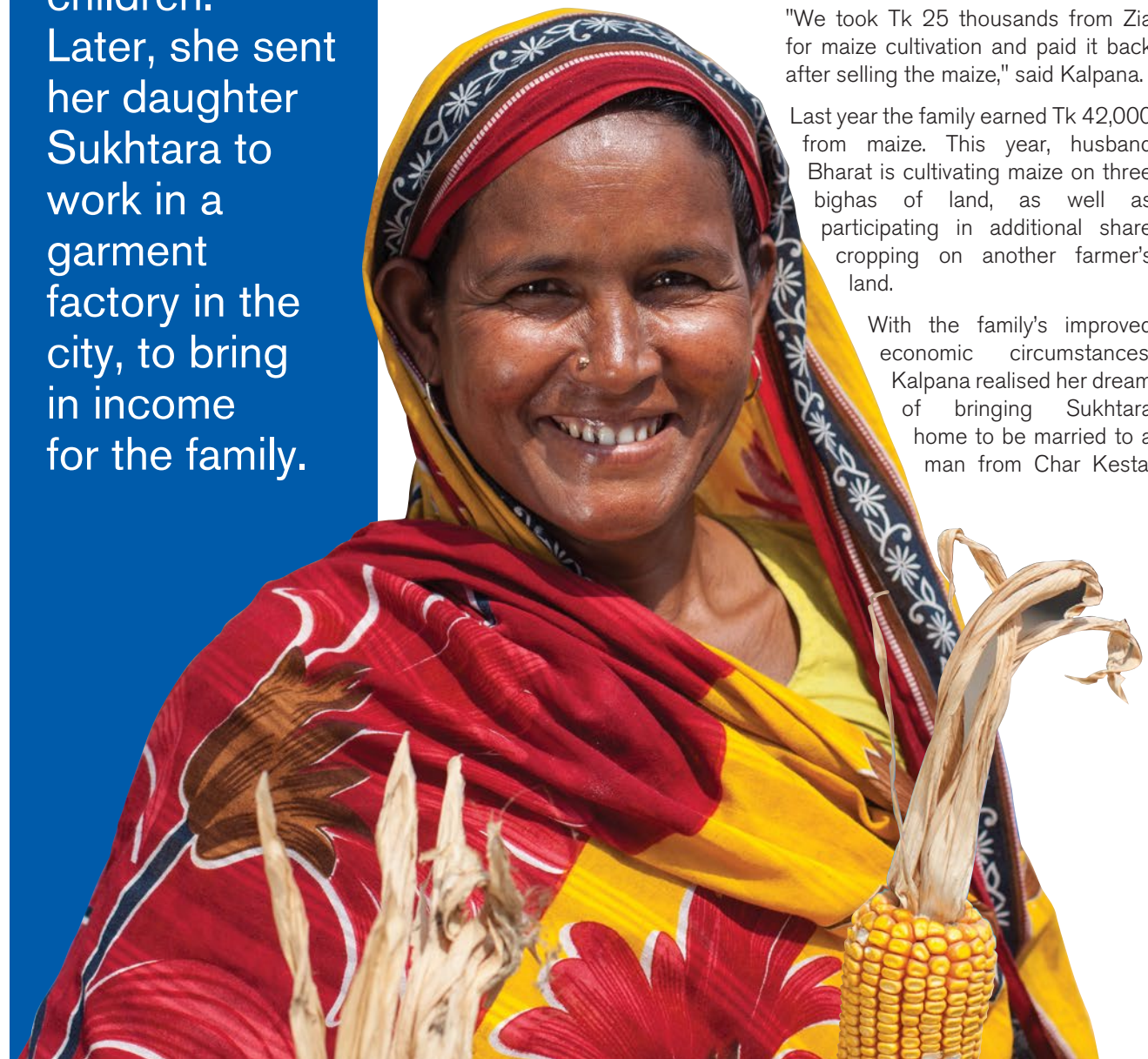
“Mostly I had to struggle alone,” recalls Kalpana, “to manage a kilogram of rice per day to feed my children.” Later, she sent her daughter Sukhtara to work in a garment factory in the city, to bring in income for the family.

Like many villagers Kalpana Begum doesn't remember her age, or the precise ages of her three children. Hers has been a life of struggle, not uncommon for a resident of Agh-Bohail Char set on a charland in the Jamuna River in Bogura district of northern Bangladesh. She has known many days where the primary concern was finding the next meal. But Kalpana's struggle is over.

Positive changes to her life over the past few years have brought about a brighter horizon.

Just a few years ago Kalpana lived in a straw-and-bamboo hut on the river bank, built on unused public land. Annually during the monsoon she had to leave her home due to seasonal flooding. Her husband Bharat Badsha had no work and perhaps to escape the frustration of acute poverty he used to wander around the country several times a year, moving from one religious shrine to another.

“Mostly I had to struggle alone,” recalls Kalpana, “to manage a kilogram of rice per day to feed my children.” Later, she sent her daughter Sukhtara to work in a garment factory in the city, to bring in income for the family.



Then, about six years ago a non-government organisation helped Kalpana and many in her community to build a new house on a raised plinth that would not be inundated every monsoon season. They also gave Kalpana a cow, the start of a better life for the family. “I bred and reared cows after that,” says Kalpana, “and with the money we leased some land for my husband to cultivate.” Initially they grew rice.

But it was when M4C started to work in the area that Kalpana and her family's situation dramatically improved. M4C convinced reputed agro-company to do business in the char.

In place of the rice, they got an option of cultivating a high yield variety of maize suitable to the island conditions and offering better profits. M4C also made sure training on how best to farm it.

But many of those farmers did not have money to buy costly seeds and fertiliser. M4C found a solution for that also. They convinced United Finance, a leasing company to provide seasonal loan through the local maize contractor Ziarul Mandal.

“We took Tk 25 thousands from Zia for maize cultivation and paid it back after selling the maize,” said Kalpana.

Last year the family earned Tk 42,000 from maize. This year, husband Bharat is cultivating maize on three bighas of land, as well as participating in additional share cropping on another farmer's land.

With the family's improved economic circumstances, Kalpana realised her dream of bringing Sukhtara home to be married to a man from Char Kesta,



an adjacent village. Her other children Sandhya Tara and Sourav study in classes eight and four.

“Due to our poverty, my eldest daughter could not study,” Kalpana says. “I want the younger two to have the benefit of a proper education.”

Kalpana never imagined her life could be the way it is now. “I had nothing,” she says. “Now I have a corrugated tin house. I have furniture including a bed and a metal cabinet. Soon I plan to buy a solar power system for our home.”

The positive change brought about by M4C's action in Agh-Bohail, a transformation mirrored in the lives of many of her neighbours, has brought an enduring smile to Kalpana's face. “I am more than happy,” she says.

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Microfinanciers: Here for Good

Microfinance programmes in Bangladesh first appeared in the mid-1980s, and gained traction in subsequent decades. The concept and modality of microfinance soon spread overseas. But, like many good things, the fervent expansion of microfinance largely bypassed the remote chars of northern Bangladesh.

The goliaths of rural microfinance, including the likes of BRAC, National Development Programme (NDP), and SKS Foundation, were daunted by how remote and geologically-unstable the chars were, considering river-erosion is a constant fact of char life. Every other year, the mighty Jamuna, Brahmaputra, Padma and Teesta rivers burst their banks, submerging many char areas. Disadvantaged char-dwellers adapt to these harsh conditions by moving around frequently.

This means that they can seldom provide collaterals or even permanent addresses to potential lenders. On the other hand, factors like lack of security while staff travel to chars and higher staff turnover also added to the already higher transaction cost of reaching and serving char-dwellers by MFI organisations.

Not a matter of surprise that for many decades only exploitative moneylenders (Dadon, Mahajan) would offer loans to char farmers. They often charged interest rates as high as 10% per month.

M4C worked with trailblazing microfinance organisations National Development Programme (NDP), BRAC, Gram Unnayan Karma (GUK), United Finance (UF) and SKS to setup branches on the chars and to develop Seasonal Loan Products (SLP). These loan schedules run parallel with seasonal farming activity on the chars. For example, loans become available just when farmers start making input payments or other farm investments. Repayment schedules (monthly/semesterly) take into account the fact that farmers will pay with cash from selling harvests/livestock from that production cycle.

Initially, char-dwellers were excited by the prospect of receiving credit, just when they needed it the most. Batch



Financial Service Providers	No. of Borrowers (SLP & ME Loan)	Total Loan Disbursed (BDT Million)
	6969	210.0
	2100	41.0
	1550	125.0
	1045	24.0
	1752	61.0

after batch of borrowers availed the facility to cover input and labour-cost during high-season. So far 15 thousand households have received SLP.

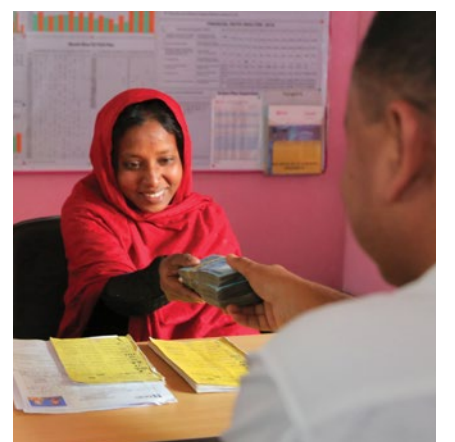
Just disbursing seasonal loans was not enough. Unlike predatory lenders, M4C actually wanted borrowers to pay back the loans on time. So char branches also conducted market facilitation activities (engaging value chain actors to ensure agro-input/output products and services) thereby improving borrowers' capacity to repay the loans. Sonia Begum (30), one of the early borrowers in the scheme, still recalls her first introduction to the facility. She received not only credit, but also business advice and training. With training and access to information, Sonia's livestock business has now flourished. In fact, she and her husband are in the process of acquiring a

residential plot on the mainland. MFI officials now say that they are pleasantly surprised by the market response and results. Demand for agricultural loans in chars is robust and seeing which, other MFIs are following suit. For instance, Eco-Social Development Organisation (ESDO) has already started their operation in chars. Char farmers have proven themselves as reliable borrower-base, since loan recovery-rates are comparatively higher than that of the mainland and mostly stands at zero default.

Recently an MFI branch manager from the chars actually won the 'Best Performer' award in his organisation, and with it several performance bonuses. Serving char areas is becoming a strategic priority for some of the microfinance institutions, and it sure looks like they are here for good.



“I was very skeptical when I was assigned to a char branch. To my surprise, my char branch has been maintaining ‘zero default rate’ since inception.”
Md. Ibrahim Hossain
Branch Manager (Monsurnagar Char), NDP, Sirajganj



Nurturing the Entrepreneurial Spirit

Asma Begum became one of the first women who received a micro loan from SKS. With her ten thousand Taka, Asma prepared to get a grip on her fortunes.



Following the birth of her third child, Asma Begum felt like she had achieved her lifelong dream of a perfect family. Asma happily toiled away in the kitchen and in crop-fields to do her part for the family.

Her husband, an agreeable and hardworking man, did his best to keep the family afloat. Through good times and bad, they worked as a team and made do with whatever they had.

But then, one day, Asma's husband passed away. He died suddenly, without symptoms or treatment. And Asma found herself adrift, and marooned in her own home.

Shielded from family finances all her life, Asma now felt exposed and vulnerable. She felt as though the entire community's gaze was on her next move. She unknowingly withdrew into her cottage, refusing to eat or meet anyone. She still has no idea who fed her children during those dark days.

Finally, nearly



three months later, Asma finally emerged from her cocoon. Her head had cleared: they had no savings to fall back on. There was hardly anything the house that could be sold off. Asma herself did not possess any special skills that could land her a job. But then she turned her gaze towards her children, and immediately knew that she couldn't let 'hopelessness' or 'fear of failure' hold her back.

Three months later, Asma Begum had sold her cottage and moved to Char Haatbari. Her children had never seen this side of their mother. They were amazed. In fact, Asma Begum herself didn't know there was this side to her.

Asma embarked on a new journey. Her first lifeline came in the form of manual labour, toiling in the acrid chilli fields of Char Haatbari. The work was exhausting and exploitative, but as a freshly-arrived widow, she had no choice.

It was around this time that Asma heard a few women discussing SKS Foundation's microfinance scheme. Asma immediately put her heart and soul into obtaining a loan for herself.

Asma Begum became one of the first women who received a micro loan from SKS. With her ten thousand Taka, Asma prepared to get a grip on her fortunes. For guidance, she regularly attended M4C community meetings, and asked advice from M4C and SKS staff. With time, she learnt about good agricultural practices, importance of quality inputs and efficient production techniques. Asma Begum joined a farmers' group under the guidance of the M4C project. Gradually, she gained fellow group-members' admiration, and soon became the team-leader. As she gained experience, Asma also started selling agricultural inputs. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, standing outside her store, Asma Begum meekly admits her joy at making it this far. She candidly admits that at one point, she had lost all hope. And she had even blamed her husband for leaving her in the lurch.

Now, Asma has married off both her daughters, while her son works a job in the capital city. All of them visit her regularly, and they often speak about Asma's fortitude that held the family together. Asma now has many friends and neighbours in the char, who visit her regularly. Many come for advice. Her financial standing allows her to entertain frequent guests. Asked if there is anything she still desires, Asma Begum replies with a grin, "grandchildren."

Asma Begum has gone from being a veiled housewife, to a migrant widow, and finally to a successful businessperson and community leader. There are now traders who want to be in business with her, and young schoolgirls who want to be like her.

No one can say what sparked this remarkable transformation in this ordinary woman from Haatbari Char. Asma herself thanks M4C and its partners for paying attention to char-dwellers, and for creating empowering conditions for women. To be successful, she says, one must start out with unwavering determination. And then, everything else will fall into place.

Thousands of char-dwelling women like Asma have risen to their potential, thanks partly to market development activities by M4C. Some of these change-stories are tangible. Some

"When a woman become economically empowered then the chances of falling victim to domestic violence decreases"
Asma Begum,
Haatbari Char



others are barely visible to outsiders. Take, for example, the story of Mosiron Begum whose entrepreneurial journey helped her find her place in the family.

Mosiron Begum (35) had long been a housewife, engaged in daily chores and a variety of unpaid, house-work. For many years, she carried on asking money from her husband, to run the household. Whenever the children needed to buy something, it would be she requesting money from her husband. Each time, the act made her feel small and worthless. To add insult to injury, her mother-in-law would sometimes express doubts about where all the money was going.

Those days are gone now. Mosiron and her cohorts have come a long way. With the women generating their own incomes, it's not necessary to ask husbands for money all the time. There were initial hiccups, Mosiron confides. At the beginning, her in-laws were dead against the housewife working outdoors, alongside other men. But then M4C engaged the in-laws and spoke to them about the interventions. Once they saw what was going on, the in-laws and elders dropped their objections, allowing women like Mosiron the liberty to pursue their business goals.

Then there's the story of Ayesha Begum (60), who at her age, has taken to

working alongside her daughter-in-law. Ayesha says that most elderly women in the chars are becoming supportive of daughter-in-laws' work. Family members now work beside younger women, and treat them with respect. Their opinions are sought on important domestic matters. Their stature also contributes to social balance, as rising incomes result in fewer quarrels and fights.

Naturally, these small changes culminate in larger social transformations. During the first quarter of 2019, a female group-member had a falling out with her in-laws, and was eventually ousted from the household. Before it could take a more serious turn, an elderly group-member convened a

woman-only arbitration process and amicably resolved the issue. The event, to many char-dwellers, represents a change in the way things have been done.

By disrupting their own, women like Asma are in fact impacting the lives of younger women. Apart from creating favorable situations in their respective households, the women are serving as potent role models for sustainable, inclusive development.

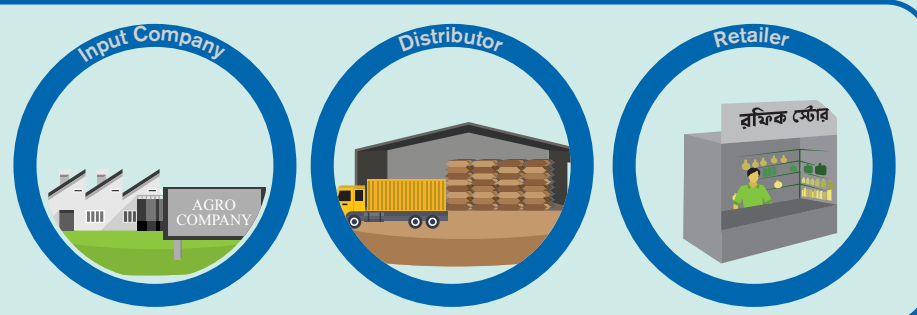




Agh-Bohail char is situated within the Jamuna River in Bogura district; like any other char area of the country, it is one of the extreme poverty pockets of Bangladesh. Characterised by isolation and inaccessibility, Agh-Bohail also faces many natural shocks and hazards, which intensifies social, economic, and political exclusions of char dwellers like Hazrat Ali.

In 2012, Hazrat Ali owned only a small piece of land and a cow. During winter season, he cultivated using traditional method and used low quality agricultural inputs. During monsoon, he traveled to different cities for working as a day-labourer, leaving his family in a vulnerable condition. His wife had to struggle alone to manage a kilogram of rice per day to feed their three children. His eldest son had to start working as an assistant to a carpenter only at the tender age of 7.

M4C mobilised private agricultural companies to conduct promotional and capacity building activities (i.e. demonstration, farmers' meeting) in the char areas and assisted them to set-up distribution channel in the chars



M4C facilitated micro-finance organisations to offer seasonal loan products to char-dwellers for the very first time. This was done considering the heightened level of agricultural productivity leading to increased need for finance



M4C supported creation of char traders for both crops and livestock. A fraction of these traders also transformed as contractors who provide input, credit support and buy-back guarantee to farmers



Actors	2012	2018
Input retailers	72	502
Distributorships	17	98
Shelling service providers	1	77
Drying service providers	4	43
Storage service providers	0	19

There is a behavioral shift among the private sectors and entrepreneurs regarding opportunity for investment, business expansion as they now see char as a viable market

Through market interactions and transactions, level of trust (provision of credit), depth of collaboration (volume of transaction) have improved

New technologies/services that are entering the chars and they are adapted and/or adopted by the local i.e. Seasonal Loan, Floating Landing Station



Market Systems Change for Vulnerability Reduction (MSC4VR) Framework

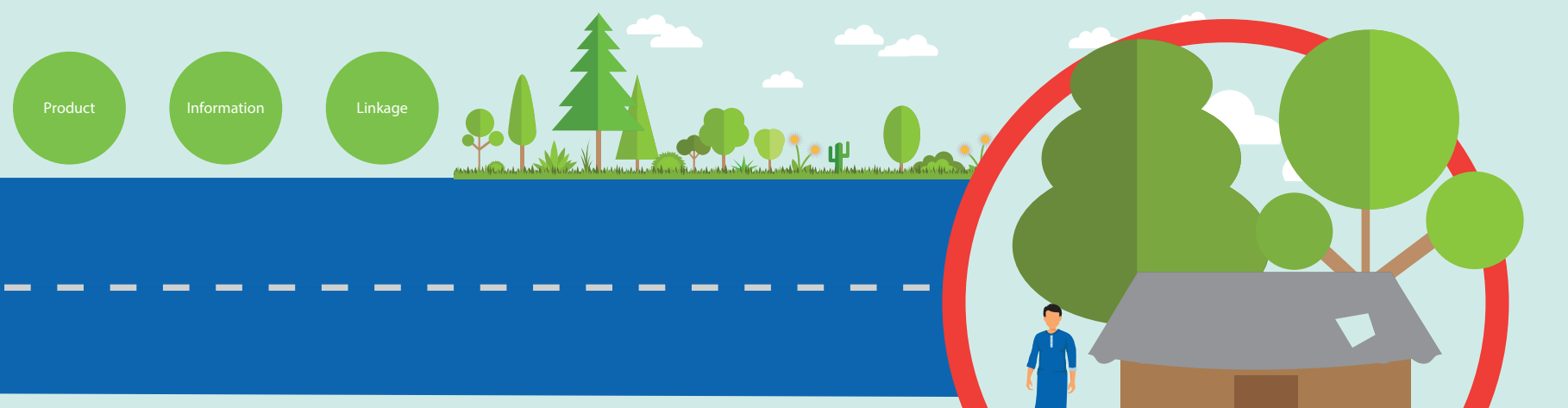
The framework assumes that strategic inputs in the market (input, output and support service market) system can positively impact the nexus of dialectics between vulnerability context which is characterised by shocks, trends and seasonality and livelihood capitals - human, natural, financial, social and physical.

Prior to M4C's interventions, char dwellers had very limited financial, physical and social capitals, but abundant human and natural capitals.

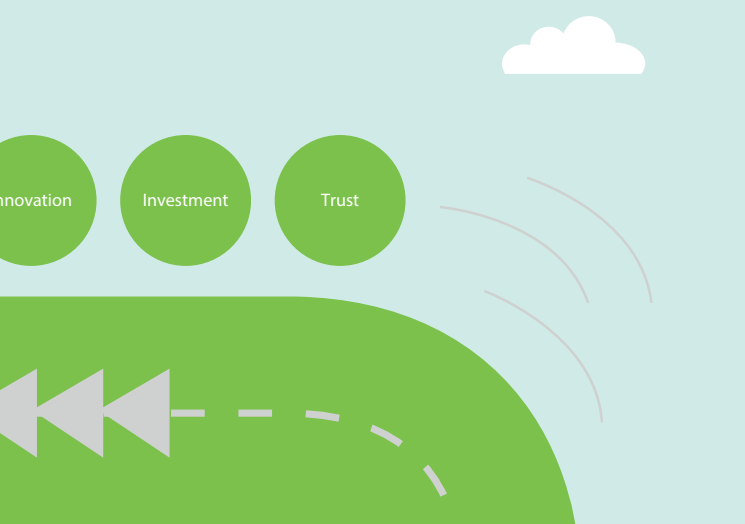
M4C's multidimensional activities across market system created a catalytic impact on char dwellers ability to accumulate capital by opening up various livelihood strategies.

Resultantly, their skills, choices and voice have enhanced as well as their income competitiveness leading to private and public sectors' changed perception about char communities.

This change triggered transformation in chars' investment climate and ultimately created a seamless transition between private and public sectors' continuous offerings and char dwellers' continuous participation in such a vulnerable context.



These dynamic market system changes have increased livelihood options for Hazrat Ali as he cultivates maize and rears cattle following improved practices. Now, using his existing piece of land and newly-leased land, he cultivates rice, chili, maize and jute in different combinations. Also, with the presence of MFI's seasonal loan products he has now better access to finance which allows him to invest in other income generating activities like livestock



His house is more resilient now on the face of a storm/heavy rain since it is no longer built with mud rather it's made of tin. He also has invested in solar panel and can light-up his house at night. He and his wife jointly rear cattle and currently own 3 cows. Out of his three sons, two are currently studying in school

*This is a graphical representation of the MSC4VR framework and does not necessarily reflect all the technicalities of the original framework

Char Agh-Bohail Changing the meaning of 'home'

When Moksed Ali, 45, and his cousin Abul Kashem, 40, returned after five years to their home village of Agh-Bohail, a sand char in the enormous Jamuna River, they were surprised by what they saw.

"Most people have built corrugated tin homes now," says Mokshed, a small trader. "The number of cattle in almost every home has increased. Last time I was here they had nothing."

Charland is affected by large-scale erosion. Moksed and Abul left their village in the Agh-Bohail char in Bogura district of northern Bangladesh, to settle in mainland of the district around two decades ago when their ancestral lands and homestead were taken by the river. It's not an uncommon circumstance. Their return this time around is driven once again by the river, which has once more changed course and in the process released their land from its clutches.

"When I left there were only two shops in the bazaar on the riverbank," says farmer Abul.

These days, Agh-Bohail market has a good number of shops. Where once there was only one teashop now there are four. There are also four shops for agriculture supplies. One tin shop has concrete pillars. There is a small restaurant as well as grocery and clothing retailers. Agh-Bohail is a different place thanks to the improved economic circumstances that have similarly changed neighbouring

villages and chars.

When the cousins asked how such changes had occurred, local farmer Saheb Ali offered an explanation. "A few years ago there was nothing on this island, just meadows and sand. But now you will see crops in fields. It didn't happen in a day but prospects improved quite dramatically after M4C started to work in this area."



He tells the cousins that initially the poorest villages from Agh-Bohail received cattle under a project. They were given cattle with the view that cattle-rearing could provide a viable livelihood. And after that M4C started to work there. "M4C did not give any particular asset," he recounts, "but they changed our fates." M4C worked to



improve access for the char-dwellers to public and private services and to better connect these remote communities with mainland markets.

"For example," Saheb Ali says, "There is a local trader, Ziarul Mandal. M4C helped him to win a dealership with an agro-company and now he sells quality seeds, fertiliser and other agricultural products in the local bazaar. M4C also brought people from the agriculture

M4C helped him to win a dealership with an agro-company and now he sells quality seeds, fertiliser and other agricultural products in the local bazaar. M4C also brought people from the agriculture department here to train our farmers how to cultivate crops in a modern way.

department here to train our farmers how to cultivate crops in a modern way." But to promote change wasn't easy. "Many farmers had no cash to buy the costly seeds, pesticides and fertilisers. They had no money to organise irrigation for their crops," says Saheb Ali. M4C introduced United Finance to the community, an



organisation specialising in seasonal loans for farmers, to facilitate the cultivation of maize and other crops. Previously any farmer wishing to take a loan must rely on unregulated money lenders who charged interest rates of around 60%. The rates offered by United Finance are by contrast reasonable. As a result, people on the char are doing well these days. Where, once they lived from meal to meal, many villagers now store a month's supply of grains in their homes. "My son started a new kindergarten school last year," says Saheb Ali. "The school has 150 students now, with monthly tuition fees of Tk 200. Many villagers are sending their children to school now because they can afford to."

Zahangir Mandal, another farmer from Agh-Bohail, says he took a Tk 45,000 loan over six months from United Finance to grow maize on nearly two acres of land. "I was able to harvest 220 maunds of maize which I sold at Tk 625 per maund, which meant in

total I earned Tk137,500 last season. Along with the loan I only paid an extra Tk 3,850 to United in interest."

"I never had the chance to go to school," says Zahangir, "but I want my son to be educated." His son currently studies in the kindergarten school of Saheb Ali's son.

In Bangladesh there are approximately 547,000 hectares of river char land, home to a few million people. But most have few assets since hardly any non-government organisations work there to offer microcredit loans with which villagers can improve their economic circumstances.

Along with United

Finance, M4C was able to encourage a non-government organisation GUK (Bogura) to open an office in Agh-Bohail in September 2015 to offer seasonal microcredit loan facilities to farmers.

"There were 323 loan recipients in the first year," says Mahidul Islam, GUK branch manager in Agh-Bohail. "The number rose to 900 a year later."

In Majhbari village, four kilometres from Agh-Bohail, meanwhile, M4C has encouraged farmers to work together. "Buyers for our crops arrive in Agh-Bohail because it is on the riverbank," says local Emdadul Haque, "but it is difficult for farmers to transport crops there; so instead we have established a common hub locally for sale of our produce. Now the traders come here too."

Emdadul is the president of the village committee M4C helped set up for this purpose.

"What we have now is a central collection point," says Rikta Begum, the secretary of the village committee.

"All our products, maize, jute, chillies and milk are sold from here. Buyers are also willing to come here as they can collect huge quantity of produce from a single place and we all get the same prices," she adds.

"The microcredit loans of GUK that M4C's intervention has made available are especially helpful to women in our community"

Rikta observes. "They like to purchase cattle, fatten them for three to four months and then re-sell those cows in the market".

According to Rikta, where it used to be difficult for any char-dweller to earn Tk 20,000 in a whole year, the same amount is now achievable within five months, thanks to cattle-rearing.

"And you will find four to five cattle in every household. We never anticipated it could happen," she says, smiling.





Change Makers:

So Close (in Deed), No Matter How Far (in Social Identity)

Saddam Wins His Challenge

Saddam Hossain (25) was born and brought up in a farmers' family, in Char Haatbari. An intelligent boy, he learnt the ways of the char early in his life. He also began working on his father's crop-fields.

Growing up, he saw two options before him: he could either escape the char life, or he could stay and work to make it better. Saddam's parents were intent on sending him to Saudi Arabia as a migrant worker. His elder brother was already working in the Kingdom, and was ready to show him the ropes. The family had some vestigial fallow land that could be sold to make money

for a plane ticket. All things considered, this seemed to be the logical course of action.

By the autumn of 2014, Saddam was almost done getting his papers and permits processed, when a friend dragged him to an M4C meeting. That day, the M4C rep was discussing the importance of quality agricultural inputs as a way of improving char lives and livelihoods. Though Saddam had gone primarily to accompany his friend, the discussion soon reignited his desire to work for his community.

Saddam's elder brother was angry, and straightaway dismissed the idea. But instead of being discouraged, Saddam felt even more motivated to pursue his vision. He took it as a challenge.

Saddam developed rapport with M4C project officials, and began accompanying them on field trips. He observed how better inputs helped both retailers and farmers, and resulted in productivity gains. Soon M4C partner organisations noticed the young man, and could not help appreciating his dedication. With encouragement from both Field Officers, Mr. Rasel of SKS and Mr. Firoz of NAFCO, Saddam took the first step: he formally attended M4C's training sessions.

Within a couple of months, Saddam borrowed ten thousand Taka (US\$ 120) from his sister and started his own farm. Many neighbours and acquaintances were impressed by his techniques, and sought help. Slowly, Saddam found himself selling agricultural inputs on a small scale. His familiarity with char-dwellers, combined with technical knowledge and skills from M4C – quickly elevated Saddam to the rank of a major distributor. Today, hundreds of



char-dwelling farmers get their seeds, fertilisers and insecticides from Saddam. Now, when asked if he did the right thing by not going to Saudi Arabia, Saddam merely points to his store and quips, "you tell me."

It is noteworthy that Saddam's case represents an example of how regular char dwellers are improving their personal economic condition and also serving their societies from the "Bottom". On the other hand, following story of Asaduzzaman Babu portrays how members of wealthy segment of the society doing the very same things from their own positions at "Top", which reflect on the success of M4C's holistic approach in development.

A Brother in Need, A Brother in Deed

Born in a renowned Kurigram family, Asaduzzaman Babu (38) has come to be known only by his first name: 'Babu Bhai' (brother Babu) char-dwellers fondly call him.

Babu Bhai attended a school in the capital Dhaka. After graduating, he worked in the banking sector for a year. Every day, he would process instruments and documents that gave clients access to vital capital and machinery. Immersed in tedious

paperwork, he often thought about the struggling farms and businesses back in his hometown. At this point the idea of Dhorola Traders begins.

In Kurigram, arable land was quickly giving way to housing projects and industrial establishments. While there were vast, fertile swathes in the char areas – most were underutilised due to technology constraints. Babu Bhai reasoned that if banks could support businesses with capital and access to machineries—then the same approach should work for char farms.

Then in 2012, Babu Bhai took a leap of faith. He bought two tractors and stationed them in chars. He announced that farmers could borrow the tractors, and pay rent at the end of harvesting season.

His family was not too impressed by this sudden move. Most well-off, reputed families do not expect their members to work in agriculture; especially after a budding career in banking. Still, Babu Bhai's family offered him support and capital.

Babu went on to engage with char farmers, delving deep into challenges and constraints. He soon became involved with M4C partner ACI Formulations Ltd. Today, Babu Bhai is one of the biggest distributors of agro

products in Kurigram. He is widely known by his first name, and fondly welcomed all around the shoal.

Babu Bhai's biggest satisfaction comes not from expansion or bottom lines, but from building something he has always dreamt about. He enjoys his status as a self-made man, and firmly believes that he could've never made such an impact while working in a bank. Babu Bhai holds M4C in high regard, extolling its market development approach. He is determined to continue working with M4C.

"Government and NGOs should expand their supports and activities for changing the faces of the hard to reach chars of Kurigram." Asaduzzaman Babu, Kurigram Sadar

Like M4C, he believes that when the right conditions prevail, his char-dwelling brethren are quite capable of improving their lives and livelihoods.



Ramisa Finds Better Days, Finally



"Life has its ups and downs," says Ramisa, a woman from remote Uttar Pipulia village on Fazlupur, a river shoal in the Jamuna River in northern Bangladesh. "It's the bad times people remember the most, not their good days," she says. Ramisa should know: in her life of struggle she's lived through more bad days than most.

Born the daughter of a day labourer, eldest among eight siblings, Ramisa was first married when she was seven years old. By the time she was twelve, she was divorced. Thereafter she enrolled in the Bangladesh government's 'food for work' project where she

could earn Tk 1,500 per month, of which Tk 1,000 she saved. But the tribulations of her childhood were not yet done. Again her parents set her marriage with a youth from the village. This second marriage lasted for just a few months. But when she returned to her father's house again, she was five months pregnant.

After the birth of her daughter, Ramisa again started to work for the government project. "We had to dig earth and carry it to build a road," she recalls. "Sometimes I carried baskets of dirt and my baby at the same time."

Through this job Ramisa studiously saved Tk 70,000, before deciding to use the money to procure a long-term lease on two bighas of land. This system is locally called Kot. The land is not purchased but the land to remain in her possession until the landowner repaid the money.

In her two bighas of land, Ramisa tried to cultivate rice and jute, but hardly made any profit. It was then that M4C started working in her area. "They arranged training for us and made seeds and fertilisers available here by arranging dealership of big companies in our small small bazar," Ramisa says. "Due to M4C I now cultivate maize and jute successfully, up to three crops per year."

M4C also introduced Ramisa to a maize trader who came to her home to purchase her entire maize crop for Tk 39,000. With the additional income, Ramisa was able to buy a cow.

"This year I have cultivated maize on three bighas of land," she says. "Soon I'll

start selling milk from my cow too." Now truly self-reliant, Ramisa finds it easier to smile.

"I went through so many things in my life, but hopefully my bad days are over, by the grace of God," she says, standing in front of the corrugated tin-roofed house she was able to construct in a corner of her father's village yard.

Ramisa's daughter is now seven years old. She studies at Parulia Primary School.

"I want to raise my daughter with a proper education," Ramisa says. "Maybe once her education is complete she can find a good job in the city." Many of her neighbours have similar histories to tell of how M4C has helped them to transform their lives.

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Char Natuapara An Island That's All Geared-up for Business

Of all the Chars in the enormous Jamuna River, Char Natuapara in Sirajganj district has some advantages. It's not as remote as other chars. There are even a few muddy roads on the island such that farmers don't need to carry all their produce to the riverbank, to send to the mainland, by hand.

A few locally modified three-wheelers called 'Nosimon' are available to transport agricultural goods across the island.

Farmers from different chars of Sirajganj and Bogura come to the Natuapara haat with their crops to sell. The haat sits twice a week on Saturdays and Wednesdays. So transportation of agricultural goods across the island is very important at this char.

When M4C first engaged itself in Char Natuapara they shared the cost with residents to construct a floating steel-made landing station on the riverbank to provide a safer and more efficient place to load and unload agricultural goods. M4C has done the same on several northern river shoals.

They also coordinated with the local government engineering department to construct a passenger shed at the small river terminal, locally called ghat, so that farmers, taking their crops to

market and weekly haat had a place to rest out of the often overwhelming sunshine.

Yet despite these improvements there was still a problem.

Hasan Ali, 30, has been a Nosimon driver on Char Natuapara for the last fifteen years. Primarily he carries goods in his carts from different villages to the haat that sits at the riverbank. His Nosimon can carry up to twenty maunds of farm produce per trip. "The improved ghat facility didn't help much at first," he says, "because our vehicles weren't able to reach it."

With their basic engines, the Nosimons were unable to negotiate the last slope down to the riverbank. "I had to unload all the cargo near the passenger shade and have people carry the goods finally to the ghat themselves, or to hire labour for the purpose," explains Hasan.

Nosimons are local modified transport. They have no gearbox. "But M4C people took the initiative to solve this problem," recalls Hasan. "They talked with local engineers of Bogura and helped me to install a gear box in my Nosimon. With my improved vehicle not only can I reach the ghat properly but I can now carry up to seventy maunds of cargo per trip."

A Nosimon costs around Tk 150,000. To install a gear box adds about Tk 30,000 to the price, but as Hasan describes, the benefits of the installation are significant. "Many other drivers were really interested in my improved vehicle," says Hasan. "I helped them to have gearboxes installed in their Nosimons too."

Indeed the islanders were so

impressed with the new, enhanced vehicle that they decided to give it a new name. "We call it Charer Gari," says Hasan. The name means 'Char Vehicle', certainly an apt name, given that with the addition of a gearbox the vehicles are now perfectly adapted to the sandy river char conditions of Char Natuapara.



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Hopes Buoyant in Mogholbasha

Situated in a remote part of Kurigram, Mogholbasha is a large river ghat (landing station, dock or terminal) of the river Dhorola. It serves as primary transit for nearly two thousand people everyday. Traders, commuters and sales people arrive here all day, to make their way to Roumari, and to various chars. Some vessels sail as far as Jamalpur or Mymensingh.

Historically, fluctuating water-levels caused the station to remain idle quite often. During dry season, the water-level would be too low for boats to access the landing station. Whereas, during Monsoon, the

water-level would be too high. During these extremes, a sloppy quagmire between the station and boats prevented passengers from walking the distance. Loading and unloading of goods and commodities was a daily struggle for char people. Patients, elderly persons, pregnant women and babies often suffered the most.

To make things worse, there was not a single structure at the landing station: no row of chairs, no shelter and no restrooms. Many passengers would simply loiter into nearby houses and impose themselves upon unsuspecting local hosts. In such a



dire condition, char dwellers have become habituated to hosting families and groups who miss their boats, or whose boats never arrived.

Community consultations revealed that the dilapidated state of the landing station was a major barrier to mobility of char dwellers. Unreliable operations could mean, for example, that agricultural inputs would be late to reach the chars, or that produce headed to mainland markets would have wait for favorable conditions. Either way, a partially operational station was a major impediment for local farmers and entrepreneurs.

Working on a mission to facilitate better market interactions, Swisscontact's M4C project understood the need to intervene. M4C field officers organised locals and sought their suggestions to figure out a solution. The solution came in the form of a floating dock, which rises and falls with the tide and/or season, making it suited for all weather conditions. M4C built the capacity of local workshops so that they could construct the floating structure. Subsequently, a Ghat Committee consisting of locals was also formed, to oversee operations and maintenance of the dock.

Mogholbasha Ghat now experiences year-round steady stream of moderate number of vessels, going to and from the ghat. Thus, a relatively minor infrastructural improvement has boosted this station's strategic importance.

Following the Mogholbasha example, M4C facilitated construction of nine (09) more floating landing stations (FLS). The Ministry of LGRD has also invested in an FLS in Meghaighat (Kazipur, Sirajganj) with more facilities (restroom, sitting arrangements etc).

Thus, with a little help, local innovations have not only helped solve a local challenge, but also set an example for all sectors.



Chars Development Research Centre

Chars Development Research Centre (CDRC) is a rural development centre based in Rural Development Academy, Bogura and is particularly dedicated to improve the livelihoods of the poor and extreme poor char dwellers. CDRC's primary focus is to host char-related research, development programmes and sustain the positive impacts of previous char-focused initiatives, ultimately leading to empowering people (women, men and children) living on the chars. CDRC's umbrella body Rural Development Academy implemented the largest and foremost char focused development initiative following asset transfer approach called 'Char Livelihood Programme', spanning the timeline of 2004-2016. Whereas, from 2012 onwards, Rural

after having policy support and approval of the Board of Governors (BOG) of RDA in its 41st regular meeting in 2012. There are basically three key areas of focus for CDRC's major components. These are:

- Research on char-relevant Topics
- Action Research (Field Implementation/Supervision)
- Training

Considering the unique institutional mandate of CDRC, M4C initiated collaboration with CDRC to strengthen its capacity as knowledge hub/exchange platform and also to conduct dissemination and advocacy for char-relevant topics. The key underlying rationale behind



initiatives and higher investment from private and public sectors, and results into benefits for large number of households (not covered by earlier interventions) without further or lower investment from Government of Bangladesh as well as donor agencies. CDRC, because of its mandate, network and multifarious nature of its founding institution, is best fit to serve this purpose as opposed to specialised institutions e.g. DAE, etc.

Leveraging on the connections formed through aforementioned activities, CDRC has signed two facilitation partnerships with following two MFIs: Gram Unnoyon Karma (GUK), Eco-Social Development

Additionally, CDRC also supported two feed-mills namely Nourish Poultry Feed and CP Bangladesh Ltd. to expand their services to the chars by arranging multiple field-visits and business-linkage sharing workshops in Sirajganj region. Moreover, CDRC has also organised a three-day long market system development training for its own staffs as well as for staffs from following organisations Rural Development Academy, Rural Development and Cooperative Division, Planning Commission, Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, Department of Cooperatives, Bangladesh Rural Development Board and Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division.



"After almost two years of collaboration between CDRC and M4C project, we are slowly taking up facilitative role similar to M4C's for increasing char-centric investment. For example, CDRC has recently signed three partnership contracts with two micro-finance institutes and one solar-energy company." Project Director, M4C and Director, CDRC, Rural Development Academy, Bogura, Bangladesh.

Development Academy also initiated another char focused development programme following market system development approach called 'Making Markets Work for the Chars' (M4C). Realising the success of RDA initiated development initiatives in chars, the idea of Chars Development Research Centre (CDRC) was conceptualised and the centre was finally established

collaboration between M4C and CDRC is that M4C project's phase II activity streams include 'Capitalisation' as a major focus area. Moreover, this partnership is also part of M4C's exit plan, considering CDRC's expected role of facilitator for char-centric investment. This is also very important from the perspective of RDA and RDCD, that the chars attract newer

Organisation (ESDO). Through CDRC's facilitation, they are replicating seasonal loan programme for char dwellers who otherwise don't have access to such financing mechanisms. CDRC has also signed another facilitation partnership with SolShare (a solar energy company) which has undertaken investment in the char areas of Sirajganj.

CDRC plans to continue playing a facilitative role for enhancing char specific investment from wider public and private sector stakeholders by instigating conversations on the socio-economic development of char dwellers.