

CASE STUDY

Sunamganj district, Bangladesh



Support to landless people to gain formal access to state-owned *khas* land

About 50% of the households in the Sunamganj district, Bangladesh, are landless, yet 44,000 hectares of public *khas* land are available for distribution. Between 2005 and 2012, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation assisted more than 12,500 landless households in applying for formal access to public *khas* land. HELVETAS' approach consisted of public awareness campaigns, dedicated workshops, and collaboration with the governmental land offices and public extension agency. Other donors have learned from these experiences and at present the approach is being scaled up and mainstreamed in other parts of the country.



INTERNATIONAL
LAND
COALITION



HELVETAS
Swiss Intercooperation

PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation

LOCATION

Sunamganj district, Bangladesh

TIMELINE

2005 - present

TARGET AUDIENCE

international development partners, civil society organisations working on land issues

KEYWORDS

land administration, land distribution, landlessness, public land, scaling up

Good practices

towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC's Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners' experience in promoting **people-centred land governance**, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members. Further information at www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do

This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

Commitment 1 Respect, protect and strengthen the land rights of women and men living in poverty

Commitment 2 Ensure equitable land distribution and public investment that supports small-scale farming systems

Case description

Background issues

The Government of Bangladesh defines households that “do not have homestead or agriculture land while their livelihoods depend on agricultural activities” as “landless” (GoB, 1997). The Agricultural Census of 2008 revealed that 3.26 million rural households in Bangladesh (or 11.4% of all rural households) are still landless, despite major land reforms in 1972 and 1984 (FAO, 2010). In the Sunamganj district, one of the poorest districts in Bangladesh, around 50% of the households are still landless. They live either on private land, through verbal agreement with the owner, or on public land. However, a total of 44,000 hectares of state-owned *khas* land is available in the district. *Khas* land is state-owned land, often located in marginal areas along rivers or coasts, that the government can lease to landless households with leases of 99 years for agricultural use.

In 1987 and 1997 the Government of Bangladesh published policies for the management of *khas* land and the distribution of *khas* land to landless farmers. The two policy documents laid out the selection procedure of households entitled to *khas* land, the structure of agricultural *khas* land management and distribution committees, the roles of the committees at different levels (national, district and sub district level), and the process of distribution of agricultural *khas* land.

These policies are fairly adequate and may not require extensive reform, but the implementation of the policies has been inadequate, due to vested interests of the landowning classes, lack of political will, inefficiencies in the way the local and national administration are organised, and lack of awareness amongst the potential beneficiaries (FAO, 2010).

“For 12 years
I lived on
others’ land.
My children
were often
starving.
Now I have a
deed of 27
decimals of
land.”

Amena Begum

Solution

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation (hereafter HELVETAS) identified the lack of access to information and the lack of capacity as the main causes of the limited access of poor and landless households to state-owned *khas* land. Therefore, between 2005 and 2012, HELVETAS rose the awareness of potential beneficiaries in Sunamganj through public campaigns and dedicated workshops; it assisted households in their application; and it collaborated with the sub-district land offices and the district administration to speed up the application process.

Thanks to the awareness campaign and assistance, more than 11,500 landless households applied for formal access to *khas* land between 2005 and 2010. From 2010 to 2012, HELVETAS provided support to another 1,000 landless to prepare and submit their applications.

As HELVETAS’ approach proved to be very successful, it was copied by other donors and organisations that are active in other regions of Bangladesh.

Activities

Installation of billboards (2005)

In 2005, HELVETAS, in collaboration with local partner GUS, approached the sub-district administration and the respective land offices. They proposed to install billboards in the sub-district to inform the population about the availability of public *khas* land in different areas and the process for getting access to this land.

Workshops (2007-2011)

Soon it became clear that the lack of a basic understanding of the application process (“where do we apply?”, “how do we apply?”) were major systemic constraint for the poor households. The government administration itself was eager to inform poor rural households about the legal procedures to gain access to *khas* land, but had limited capacity to do this. Backed by the government administration, HELVETAS started organising workshops at sub-district level, involving the sub-district administration, the land office, and representatives from the poor landless households.

However, HELVETAS realised that it was probably more important to disseminate information at union level and to strengthen the links between the land offices and the unions. From 2009 on, HELVETAS organised workshops at union level, involving the union councils, the union land office and representatives of the landless people.

Thanks to these workshop and the follow-up support, a total of 5,000 landless poor households formally applied for public *khas* land between 2005 and 2010. Out of this number, 1,749 households (22% headed by women, 48% poor households, 30% extreme poor households) got access to 130 hectares of public land. The applications of the remaining households are still under consideration.

Tailor-made support to the families (2010-present)

In 2010 HELVETAS piloted a project in which it hired local NGOs to provide tailor-made support to landless households in submitting their formal application for access to *khas* land to the government land offices. These local service providers are well acquainted with the application preparation and process and have good relations with the field level land offices. The role of the service providers was to support the landless households to prepare (fill in) the *khas* land application, using the prescribed format and completing it with all necessary documents. The service providers also accompanied the households in submitting their applications to the sub-district land offices. This intervention is on-going and is being scaled up.

Focus on the extreme poor (2007-2011)

Still, the extreme poor were still hard to reach. Between 2009 and 2012, HELVETAS focused its SHIREE project on the economic empowerment of extremely poor landless households (the bottom 10% households). Through this project, HELVETAS provided support to 1,000 households (that qualified as “100% beneficiary households”) in preparing and submitting their application for formal access to *khas* land.

Support to the land offices and district administration (2010-present)

The processing and approval of applications by the Sunamganj administration was very slow. One reason was that the *khas* land distribution process in the district had been inactive for over three decades. Therefore, HELVETAS supported government land offices at different levels (union, sub-district and district level) to reinstate the land distribution process and speed up the approval of applications. In practice, it supported the offices by (a) identifying eligible landless households and (b) tracking and following up on the applications across the different levels of bureaucracy.

Thanks to this intervention, the government approved all applications of the “100% beneficiary households” that had applied for access to *khas* land. It should be noted that the government allocates and registers all *khas* land titles in the name of both husband and wife of the respective households.

The process motivated another 5,500 households (that were not supported by any HELVETAS project) to apply for access to the *khas* land.

Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

The policy of the Bangladesh Government on *khas* land management and distribution (GoB, 1997) is well aligned with the 10 commitments for people-centred land governance:

- *khas* land can only be allocated to landless families whose livelihoods depend on agriculture;
- the land titles are issued to husband and wife jointly; in case the applicant is a single person or widow, the land title should include other family members as well;

- the distributed *khas* land should be used for agricultural production; if the land remains fallow, the government can take back the land and reallocate it to other landless households;
- landless households do not have to pay a fee or price to get access to *khas* land.

Despite the very pro-poor and people-centred character of the *khas* land policy, potential beneficiaries cannot sufficiently benefit from it, because of their lack of knowledge of the policy and their low capacities in engaging with the bureaucracy. The present case study shows how HELVETAS managed to overcome these problems in one district.

Changes

Baseline

The Agricultural Census of 2008 revealed that 3.26 million rural households in Bangladesh (or 11.4% of all rural households) are landless and another 7.9 million rural households (or 28% of all rural households) are tenants (FAO, 2010). In the Sunamganj district, around 50% of the 440,000 households are landless.

There is an estimated 1.2 million hectares of state-owned *khas* land available in Bangladesh for distribution to landless households (FAO, 2010). In the Sunamganj district, some 44,000 hectares of state-owned *khas* land is available for distribution. In 1987 and 1997 the Government of Bangladesh adopted policies for the management and distribution of *khas* land. In order to get formal access to the *khas* land, the landless households have to submit a formal application to the land office. When approved, the land office issues a 99-year lease deed.

However, most rural families are unaware of the availability of *khas* land and the procedures to apply for it – or they have insufficient capacities to start the application process. In fact, 48% of the population in Bangladesh is illiterate and in Sunamganj this number raises to 65%. A survey in 1991 showed that nearly 90% of the rural population was unaware of the tenancy reforms approved 7 years earlier (FAO, 2010). There is no recent data on the awareness of rural population of the *khas* land policies.

Finally, in the few cases that households did apply for *khas* land, their applications often remain pending for many years, due to the lack of capacities and resources of the land offices..

Achievements

Thanks to the support provided by HELVETAS since 2005, around 10,000 families have applied for formal access to *khas* land in Sunamganj: 3,000 have already obtained their title and the remaining applications are in process. In two sub-districts where HELVETAS provided support to the land offices, Derai and Sulla, all applications had been processed by the end of 2012.

A wide range of local and national media reported on the process. This resulted in a higher awareness of at different levels.

The national government has formally recognised the contribution of HELVETAS as supportive and helpful for both the administration and the landless households. The approach of HELVETAS has been applied in other regions of Bangladesh.

Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

Applicants need assistance, not only information

The dissemination of information is necessary but not sufficient to help the landless households apply for *khas* land, since many of them are illiterate. Support in the preparation of the application process and follow-up on the application process at different stages is equally important.

Service providers can assist the applicants

Hiring local service providers to help families prepare their application speeds up the process. They oriented the families in the application process and ensured that the applications were complete. Their service was swift and cost-effective.

Media attention creates pressure

Media played an important role in putting pressure on the government to speed up the approval process. Every time a *khas* land application and selection event took place, both print and electronic media positively highlighted the news. By putting the administrative personnel of the selection process in the spotlights, the personnel was inspired to perform well and encouraged to avoid misappropriations. The media acted as a sort of watchdog.

Buy-in from government officials is essential

Appropriate advocacy and good working relations with government offices played a vital role in the success. For the *khas* land application and approval process in Sunamganj, the Deputy Commissioner of Sunamganj was the key authority. As he was convinced, he actively spurred the sub-district land offices to speed up the selection and approval process.

Lessons for policy makers

Besides access to the *khas* land, the families also needed support to make the land productive. In this regard, the support from the public extension agency is useful.

Distribution of the *khas* land to *groups* of landless households is also a valuable practice, especially in the case of extremely poor households.

In order to improve and strengthen land governance in Bangladesh, a *khas* land database is needed.

"I cultivate different kind of vegetables [...] and earn by selling my products. [...] Having a land of your own to live on - it is a great feeling".

Ismot Begum

Challenges

The *khas* land application process is complex and requires valid information. This information lies with the government land offices. The land offices at union level or sub-district level usually do not provide this information to poor households. Therefore, HELVETAS hired local service providers to support landless households in the preparation of their applications. The support of the local service providers substantially facilitated the process.

After the submission of the applications it was quite challenging to get in touch with the local level land offices (union and sub-district level) to understand the status of the applications. Therefore the approval process was sped up through advocacy at district level.

Follow-up

HELVETAS' approach in supporting the application for *khas* land has been scaled-up by HELVETAS and other development partners throughout the country: for instance Shushilan and Concern World Wide have adopted a similar approach for their work on *khas* land in respectively Barguna district and Kishoreganj district.

Supporting material

References and further reading

FAO (2010). Bangladesh, in: *On Solid Ground: Addressing land tenure issues following natural disasters*. Rome: FAO. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1255b/i1255b00.htm>

GoB (Government of Bangladesh) (1997). *Agricultural khas land management and distribution rules*.

Helvetas (2015). Project website on the Helvetas website, http://bangladesh.helvetas.org/en/projects_bangladesh/eep__shiree_unnoti_project/

Photos, videos

Documentary on Access to khas land, http://youtu.be/V4o_oGp5C7Q

Documentary on the pilot project, <http://youtu.be/DfFZLT4ajUY>

Islamic TV News about HELVETAS' work, <http://youtu.be/Exfwzgv9WsA>

Mohona TV News about HELVETAS' work, <http://youtu.be/IP4pEYTdmSg>

Nepal Television News about HELVETAS' work, <http://youtu.be/0QeY3bOMWFY>

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The [International Land Coalition \(ILC\)](#) is a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organisations working together to promote secure and equitable access to and control over land for poor women and men through advocacy, dialogue and capacity building.

The opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily constitute an official position of the International Land Coalition, nor of its members or donors. Authors: Zahid Hasan and Shamim Ahamed (HELVETAS Swiss Cooperation) and Jan Cherlet (ILC Secretariat)

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