



## Breaking Down Barriers

### Village women spread the word

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#### SUMMARY

Women deserve access to affordable, appropriate and environmentally friendly technologies for drying and storing rice seed. To reach more women, the national Agricultural Advisory Society (AAS) trained women trainers of ten local organisations, covering 30 villages in two districts in Northeast Bangladesh. AAS taught them on organisational, communicational and technical aspects, after which they established groups of poor women. Organising the training sessions in the house of one of its members made participation easier and created a relaxed learning environment. In group discussions, women trainers used a set of photographs depicting real-life situations to stimulate creativity, which resulted in a range of multi-purpose drying tables made of local materials. The seed drying tables brought poor women together around a common issue and gave them a powerful experience, enhancing their self-esteem. For seed storage, AAS bought plastic drums at the nearest city market and sold them in the rural areas at wholesale price. With the improved technologies and training, yields improved within a season. Moreover, not only did women gain control in deciding how the extra money would be spent, the additional income also bought them respect. Early project successes spread first to other female family members of those women trained, followed by other group members and the wider community. After one season some trained women became effective extensionists themselves, each visiting three to five neighbouring villages and mobilising new groups. When given the opportunity and with limited financial support, poor women trainers were highly committed to alleviate poverty and displayed a high level of solidarity with poor women in other communities.

## ACTORS AND NETWORKS

"We do everything, particularly in processing and storing rice and rice seed, but get no recognition. Teach us something for which family and the society remember us," an appeal of one of the women during a focus group discussion conducted by AAS. AAS is a national non-government organisation (NGO) promoting appropriate agricultural technologies for the poor. Over the years, it has developed a network of more than 150 NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs). By 2004, AAS employed 15-20 staff members who had trained about 7,500 and motivated another 15,000 farmers under various sub-projects of the DFID-funded Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance project (PETRRA). In the process, AAS established a good working relationship with national and international agricultural research and extension institutions.

In developing and testing a women-led group extension method, AAS identified two local NGOs and eight community-based organisations in ten villages. These partners played a significant role, especially in selecting poor women farmers, forming groups, organising training courses, monitoring of progress and problems, disseminating information, and generating community support. They were also crucial in maintaining the linkage between AAS and the groups.

## EVOLUTION OF THE METHOD

In July 2002, AAS submitted the sub-project proposal to PETRRA for their approval. Mr. Harun-Ar-Rashid, executive director of AAS, already had had some success with the Farmseed project (see Chapter 18), but now wanted to specifically train the wives of these farmer seed producers on post-harvest issues. He was urged to get in touch with Paul Van Mele, who had been working on participatory technology development under the PETRRA Seed Health Improvement sub-project. Possible ways to shortcut the participatory process were discussed when they met in Dhaka at a meeting facilitated by PETRRA.

Paul had a written narrative of his first women's meeting in Maria village in which arose strong community engagement for the development of seed drying tables, which addressed a new need (see Box 3.1). This helped in understanding what really had boosted people's motivation and creativity to solve their own problems. He also selected and handed over 10-15 photographs, depicting underlying principles of

### Box 3.1 A New Need

Drying rice seed in the rainy season is a relatively new need, brought about by the introduction of irrigation pumps and modern varieties during the past decades. Rice grown in the dry or *boro* season is harvested at the onset of the rains. Drying tables emerged as a pro-poor technology, first developed by women in Maria village, Bogra (Van Mele and Zakaria, 2005).

drying and a variety of designs of locally-made drying tables.

The project proposal was further revised and approved in November 2002, after Harun had identified and appointed a woman (the senior author) to lead the project. Activities would be implemented in Kishoreganj and Habiganj districts in Northeast Bangladesh.

## THE WOMEN-LED GROUP EXTENSION METHOD

### Build partnerships with local organisations

As soon as the sub-project was approved, AAS officials visited the project areas, met with partner organisations, discussed the project objectives with their partners and agreed on their roles within the project. This went smoothly because AAS had worked in the area for many years and maintained good contacts with many organisations.

### Train women trainers

Training courses were designed and imparted to the female field staff of AAS and partner organisations on rice seed drying and storage. Later on, women farmers joined the core of trainers, and group management and communication skills were emphasised.

### Select resource-poor women and form groups

The next crucial task was to select women of farm families who:

- have land, but less than 0.4 ha
- consume rice of own production for 3-8 months
- have experience in processing of rice and rice seed
- are physically fit, and
- are willing to undergo training, train others and disseminate information.

Poor women were preselected by field staff of AAS and its partner organisations through home visits and a benchmark survey. Focus groups then decided on the final composition, with each group comprising 20-25 motivated members.

Group members were either part of already existing NGO or community-based organisation groups, or had no prior exposure to rural development activities in their area at all. Despite members of existing groups being more likely to

In Maria village, Sarifunnesa proudly shows us the seed drying table she made with her husband Hatem Ali: "Before we dried our seed on the ground, but this became a real problem when we started growing boro rice. We are proud of our table."



become good women extension agents, AAS and its partners mostly preferred to have entirely new groups established for the project (Table 3.1).

Each group selected a group leader in a democratic way while each partner organisation nominated a person to monitor and liaise between them and the group. In some cases, the same person performed dual functions of group leader and liaison person.

"What I have learnt from the project is very important and has given me a lot of benefits. Now I want other poor women to get the same benefits, so I decided to go to other villages myself," said Masuda, one of the women farmer extension agents in Haria village in Habiganj district. When Paul Van Mele asked her how she introduced herself in a new village, she replied "When I tell them my name and what I want to share with them, some people are suspicious, but when I tell them I have been trained by AAS, they get confidence. Those who are interested establish a group." Masuda is a convinced communicator and one out of many innovative farmers in Bangladesh. She takes care of two women's groups as part of the project, and out of women's solidarity and Islamic conviction she started activities in two more villages.

**Table 3.1 Differences between existing women's groups and newly established ones for agricultural extension**

VARIABLES	EXISTING GROUPS	NEW GROUPS
Gender-related barriers	Social and religious barriers have been overcome; female members already go to markets, work on the field, and attend local government meetings	Barriers still prevail, but decrease faster in villages where older groups are already in place
Intra-household decision-making	Women are more independent	Women depend on decision of male household members
Ease of using female group members as extension agents	High	Low
Openness to new ideas	Low. Members easily communicate and are in a socialisation process, but may be disinterested in new ideas	High. Projects can inject new ideas more easily
Motivation of AAS and its partners to work with these groups	Low, because other organisations have already conveyed all their messages and inputs to these members, and little social capital remains to be built	High, because they can get new members, or help to overcome social barriers without having to cover the whole range of development activities

### Strengthen group management and women's communication skills

Several orientation and training courses on organisational and technical aspects such as group dynamics, leadership and information dissemination were organised once groups were formed. Especially the women farmer extension agents developed good insights in how to best select a group coordinator. "We observe the women's attitudes during the first meeting and select a group coordinator based on her talking skills, commitment, time consciousness and good leadership skills," said Masuda.

### Create a conducive learning environment

Initially, Ms. Rokhsana Begum, agronomist from AAS and other women trainers from AAS and its partners facilitated the sessions. Later on, women farmer extension agents joined in. Training sessions were held in the house of one of the group members. The hospitality of the host towards the participants created a good learning environment.

To further improve learning, groups were divided into two smaller ones during discussion sessions. In the beginning, the participants could not hide their anxiety and hesitation to attend these sessions, but soon after the discussions began, they found the topics very familiar and their participation became spontaneous.

At first, participants were invited to narrate their experiences of drying rice and rice seed. Women treat their rice for home consumption and seed differently than rice for sale. The latter is dried directly on the courtyard floor instead of on bamboo mats or jute bags, and only for two instead of three days.

### Introduce technologies by building on local knowledge and practices

During these sessions the participants were given laminated A4-size colour photographs, depicting different aspects of drying, and were encouraged to describe the advantages and disadvantages of each of these (Table 3.2). These sessions were held to stimulate the creative thinking process to improve seed drying.

### Explore locally available solutions

After a short break, photographs of three different drying tables were shown to the participants. Women were again encouraged to express their opinion about the use, advantages and disadvantages. There was no real table on display, but the participants expressed their keen interest as if they were choosing a real one. Their decision criteria for a good drying table were as follows:

Photographs depicting daily life are used in women's group discussions and challenge them to look for creative solutions to improve their seed drying.



- lower cost
- easy to make
- scope for multi-purpose use, and
- easy to transport from one place to another.

**Table 3.2 Photograph-supported women's group discussions**

CONTENT OF PHOTOGRAPH	ADVANTAGE	DISADVANTAGE	REMARKS
Saris hanging to dry	Dries quickly under sunshine and open air	None	Dries quickly because saris are thin
Quilt hanging to dry	Dries, but slowly	Requires more time	Dries slowly because quilts are thick
Chillies and other spices drying on the roof	Out of reach of the children	Birds may eat if not kept an eye on	Dries quickly because hot roof produces more heat, but is too hot for seed
Various things drying on the machan (scaffold)	Could be protected from rats, poultry, rain; could be used for multiple purposes and as platform for sitting & gossiping	Poor farmers cannot afford it	Requires cash at the time of construction
Rice seed drying on the yard/floor	Could be stirred by feet and hand as needed; all adult family members can contribute	More time consuming; clear sunshine required; children and poultry destroy rice	This is a traditional practice, familiar to local communities

The women were willing to make tables and some suggested that at least one table should be made in their presence by the project. Within a year, more than 60% of the project women made their own table.

Selina Akhter, one of the women said: "I can motivate anybody to make a table, and if I would have a photo of my drying table, I would show it and discuss with others whenever I go out." This hasn't been explored so far, but surely opens up new routes for women-to-women extension.

### **Improve access to outside technologies**

In the group discussion session, a plastic drum was exhibited before the participants and its benefits explained: it is airtight and moisture-proof; seed is protected from rats and insect infestation; the quality of seed remains good ensuring good



germination and better plant growth and subsequent yield.

Although all participants were in favour of a plastic drum, some were a little disappointed, as it would be difficult for them to buy a drum at Tk 200 (US\$ 3.50).

However, after initial success of early adopters became obvious, the demand increased rapidly. Sufficient availability of plastic drums in the local markets of the project areas remained an acute problem for months. AAS, with financial assistance from PETRRA, then decided to organise and pay for transport of plastic drums, particularly for the poor. Others equally placed orders to buy plastic drums, but on a full cost recovery basis. Transportation cost per drum was Tk 25 (US\$ 0.45) for Kishoreganj and up to Tk 35 (US\$ 0.60) for Habiganj district. By early 2004, AAS had distributed about 600 plastic drums in the project area, the majority being for the poor (Table 3.3), and for the following season other community members requested 200 more drums.



#### A proven cow: expose early success of innovators to group members

In Bangladesh, the price of a cow is determined by her milk production. It means that one has to show the result first, and only then can start preaching if one wants to sell something. Initially, most poor women hesitated to buy a plastic drum and to build a drying table, because of the relatively high price of bamboo. But as the good results of those who were using these technologies became obvious, most got convinced about the value of the investment. Over 400 women made their own drying table, often with locally available materials cheaper than bamboo.

Ms. Alia, 25 years old and having three children, explained how her family had received training from AAS on various topics. She now had enough of her own rice to feed her family for eight months per year, compared to only four months before

**Table 3.3 Percentage adoption of technologies by poor women in Kishoreganj and Habiganj districts**

TECHNOLOGY	PARTICIPATING WOMEN (N=570)	OTHER WOMEN IN PROJECT VILLAGES	WOMEN IN OTHER NEARBY VILLAGES
Seed drying tables	60-70	20-25	5-10
Plastic drum	80-85	20-35	10-15

the project. "If there is money, there is respect. Even my mother-in-law and my neighbours look up to me now," she said. Her group was considering jointly saving money to buy a power tiller.

### **Stimulate informal communication and share with wider community**

The women's sisters, aunts and sisters-in-law received the news of achieved benefits first, after which it circulated among neighbours. Following initial success, the groups organised open sharing and demonstration sessions in their village. Pictorial brochures, a poster and a video documentary were produced to show the advantages of innovative rice seed drying and storage.

For wide-scale information dissemination, a village fair was held in a festive mood at a suitable open space near the roadside in Pakundia, Kishoreganj. In February 2004, nearly 500 people, of whom 300 were women, gathered from 25 neighbouring villages. Local staff of AAS and representatives of the local partner organisations guided and briefed the visitors. Women farmers staffed the stalls, each designed for demonstrating various aspects of rice seed drying and storage, and proudly shared their experiences with others.

Another attractive event in the fair was *jari gaan*, a folk song narrating advantages and disadvantages of the traditional and improved drying and storage methods, presented by a local folk singer group. Many PETRRA sub-projects adopted the use of folk songs in their activities, after this was brought to their attention by the NGO Shushilan in Southwest Bangladesh (see Chapter 10, Picture Songs).

## **KEYS FOR SUCCESS**

### **Good selection criteria and procedures**

All women were sincerely motivated to participate in the project. This was achieved by proper selection of partner organisations that helped in identifying resource-poor

Village fairs and folk entertainment are a socially accepted way to disseminate agricultural information to women in rural Bangladesh.





women and forming groups. Carefully identified women farmer extension agents and group coordinators helped to reduce the communication gap.

Better-off farmers, men and women, readily picked up on innovations that were triggered or introduced by the project for the poor. The reverse would probably not have been true.

### **A culturally and socially sensitive method**

For training, women did not have to move outside the family boundary, which the society could have objected to. The organisation of functional groups of poor women helped to empower them, while training and exposure increased their confidence. Inter-personal communication processes between women ensured effective dissemination of information beyond project participants.

### **Accessible and environmentally friendly technology**

There is no hi-tech or capital-intensive entrepreneurship required in this project. Bamboo or other materials required for making a drying table are available in every rural area and the farmers themselves can easily make a drying table.

### **Confidence building and respect for the local knowledge system**

By validating traditional knowledge, women gained confidence in their problem-solving skills, as illustrated in Box 3.2.

## **RISKS, DIFFICULTIES AND ASSUMPTIONS**

### **People's expectations**

People, when approached by an NGO or community-based organisation, expect that they will get access to a broad range of rural development activities and inputs, such as credit. After all, that is what others got when they became a member of an NGO. Because this project only focused on post-harvest technologies, with training as a major input, women had little scope to actually strengthen their groups.

Women's groups would likely be more motivated if a broader agricultural training package could be offered, including modern varieties, crop diversification and post-harvest. Giving women access to a broad range of agricultural technologies is indeed the way forward, as discussed in Chapter 4 on the family approach by Harun-Ar-Rashid.

### **Inadequate supply of plastic drums**

Plastic drums are hardly available at local village markets, only in towns. Moreover AAS could not accommodate increased demands for plastic drums after the project

**Box 3.2**  
**Teeth of Gold**

by Helen Latifun Nessa

At the onset of the session, I asked the women if they use any equipment to test seed dryness prior to storing their rice seed. All of them denied firmly, so I asked once more:

"Are you sure that you don't have any equipment with you to test seed dryness?"

"Yes, we are. We do not use any equipment," they replied.

"Then how do you do the testing?"

"We use our hand, feet, ear and teeth."

"Don't you consider these as your equipment?"

"Oh my God!"

They all grasped the message and laughed loudly. When Ms. Rokhsana, the facilitator of the session, asked them to explain their traditional method, they replied:

"A crackling sound comes when we shake seeds close to our ears."

"A croaking sound comes when we bite rice with our teeth."

"The seed feels slippery when we stir it with our feet."

"The seed feels lighter when we test the weight of dried rice."

Despite the range of diagnostic tools, all confirmed that using teeth is the best way. When I suggested they should take utmost care to keep their teeth well and strong, they all laughed again.

Then the practical session began. Women were invited to rate three batches of seed with 11, 13 and 15% moisture content, respectively. They were all excited. One by one they came to the front and slowly started crunching the seed. All had a serious and attentive look on their face while Ms. Rokhsana noted down their opinion.

Participants were still in for a surprise when Ms. Rokhsana brought out a scientific moisture meter to test the validity of their opinion. Once more doubt appeared on the participants' faces. "Do you have any objection?" she asked. Although a little confused, curiosity took over and they soon came forward accepting it as a challenge. Rokhsana explained that the moisture content of rice seed should be less than 12% and if it were higher, seed would require more drying.

Rokhsana took the moisture meter and started testing. The results confirmed the women's opinion. The whole event made them very happy: they realised their teeth are worth gold.

finished, because of its financial and management constraints. Other means to improve storage could have been explored, such as painting earthen pots to make them airtight (see photo and Chapter 5). With strong community institutions in place, such as the federations in Northwest Bangladesh, communal storage also becomes an option, as described in Chapter 20.

### **Shortage of technical staff**

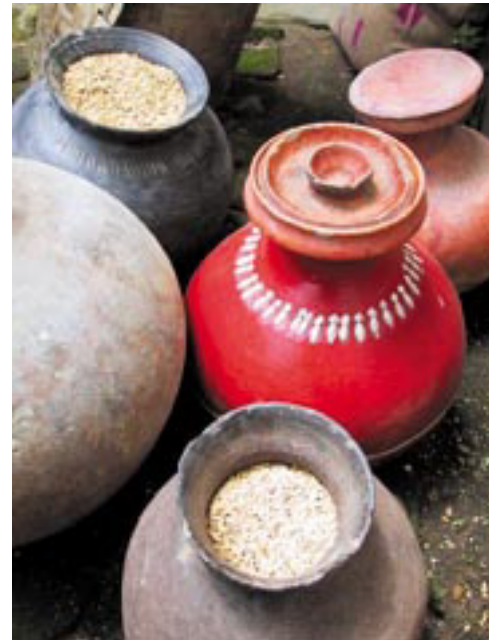
Nowadays, highly trained people often face difficulties finding a job in Bangladesh. Yet at the same time there is a problem of getting qualified and motivated

agriculture graduates to work in rural areas, especially women. At least a core group of technically competent women trainers would be needed as master trainers to initiate the method elsewhere.

## SCALING UP

Training women extension agents from rural communities had tremendous impact in mobilising other poor women. Bangladesh has many innovative women farmers, as will become apparent throughout the book, and surely it is a rich and so far under-utilised human resource in disseminating agricultural technologies. The method described in this chapter should be replicated in other areas of Bangladesh and countries where access of women to agricultural information is an issue.

Since the implementation of this project and witnessing women's feedback, the agricultural NGO AAS started including women in all their extension activities.



Making earthen pots airtight by paint or old kitchen oil reduces people's dependency on outside technologies like plastic drums.

## CONCLUSION

Farmers of all categories have accepted the women-led group extension method. Initially a core group of female trainers was needed, but as capacity was built within a village, innovative women farmers emerged as good extension agents. With some training and limited financial incentives, these women confidently developed new women's groups in neighbouring villages. This project has shown that poor women, when given the opportunity, display a high level of solidarity and commitment to alleviate poverty. Having an appropriate technology for the poor that is easy to extend, such as seed drying tables, gave women a fast and powerful experience of being successful extension agents and boosted their self-esteem.

## REFERENCE

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