

Jahanara Begum makes the transition from labourer to farmer



'In this char region, our income from half acre (50 decimals) of land is limited – not enough to meet the basic demands of a seven-member family. I had to work as labour at harvest time,' said Jahanara Begum.

Living in Bogra in northern Bangladesh she worked for five years as a day labourer during the rice and maize post-harvesting season, earning BDT70 (USD1) a day. Female farmers often had difficulty gaining the trust of contractors in order to branch out business activities. Jahanara's husband grows maize and other crops, but his yield was very low.

In 2008, Katalyst supported Rubel Ahmed, a retailer of agri-inputs in Bogra, to initiate maize contract farming with 200 farmers. After seeing his sales increase during the 2008-09 season, Rubel expanded his contract farmer base to about 350. Katalyst built Rubel's capacity to become a successful contractor, linked him with maize seed companies, feed mills, and financial institutions, and developed his skills to enable him to build the capacity of new contract farmers the following year. Many women labourers, such as Jahanara, were involved in tending crops and post-harvesting activities for contract farmers. Rubel encouraged Jahanara to lease some land and start her own cultivation. With Rubel's support, Jahanara got good quality seed, fertilizer and pesticide, along with guidance on appropriate cultivation techniques. She grew maize on 2.3 acres (231 decimals) of char (river sediment) land and 1.15 acres (115 decimals) of leased land. Rubel said, *'Women labourers are usually more dedicated and work more diligently than men – and most importantly they don't breach their contract. This gives them a comparative advantage over male farmers.'*

With an investment of BDT4,500 (USD65), Jahanara earned BDT12,000 (USD170) for each bigha (.33 acre) cultivated. This high yield was due to proper and timely use of quality inputs and appropriate and accurate knowledge and cultivation techniques.

'I'll spend the money on food, shelter, clothing, and education for my children,' said Jahanara. Anticipating that her income will continue to increase, she has already made plans to expand her farming area in 2011.

Jahanara told that she had the full support of her family and community to work, and her success has encouraged others in the region. During 2010, 30 new female labourers received training from Rubel and with support from the contractor, leased char land to farm. As a result of their income, the women farmers are more empowered, and become part of the decision-making process in their families with support from male members.

Katalyst currently is working with various financial institutions to provide feasible loan to scale up the contract farming model. Such schemes will support contractors such as Rubel, to positively impact char farmers such as Jahanara.

In Katalyst's core working areas of maize there are around 5,600 female labourers and like Jahanara Begum some of them have the potential to become farmer by 2013.