

Smallholders Profit from Lucrative New Crop in Bangladesh

Maize, a new and expanding commercial crop in Bangladesh, offers smallholders options for improving income and food security. But first they have to learn how to grow it. Nur-E-Elahi is happy to help.



Maize production has increased almost three-fold in Bangladesh since 2000. Rising incomes have increased local consumption of eggs and meat, particularly poultry, and maize is the primary ingredient in poultry feed. Because maize is a relatively new crop in Bangladesh, training plays an essential role in empowering smallholders to profit from this new commodity.

The benefits of growing maize, however, are not limited to more income. CIMMYT, as part of its Whole Family Training project for maize, also seeks to improve health and nutrition in poor rural households. The project explores opportunities for households to consume and find alternative uses for the maize they grow, for empowering women in crop production, and for contributing to community development.

CIMMYT affiliate scientist Nur-E-Elahi is optimistic about these formidable objectives, based on the geometric expansion of training, women's participation in maize production, and one notable example of community development in a poorer region of the country where the training project has played a prominent role.

● Spreading the news and the profits

Whole Family Training for maize relies on a system of training trainers—usually village extension workers, either from the government or NGOs. These people conduct short workshops (roughly eight families per workshop, including husband, wife, and two older or adult children) in selected communities. Since early 2002, 228 trainers have been trained. They have facilitated workshops with 7,284 individuals in the 9 districts initially targeted by the project.

A key element of Whole Family Training is the recognition that women, even in the most conservative areas of Bangladesh, provide labor and contribute to decisions related to the production, marketing, and utilization of crops.

"Whole Family Training takes this fact into account," says CIMMYT agronomist Craig Meisner. "It acknowledges that each family determines the roles of its members. The training is inclusive. It provides knowledge and technology for everyone, independent of gender, age, or any other differences among family members."

The success of the training had been well documented for wheat (another relatively new crop in Bangladesh), but would it work for maize? Nur is encouraged by what he has seen, including one very visible indicator: poor maize farmers, even sharecroppers, now earn enough money to cover their children's school fees *and* put tin roofs on their houses (a marked improvement in the quality of life in a land where average annual rainfall is nearly two meters).

● Links from farm to industry raise local prosperity

Nur has also seen the potential for broader impact at the community level in Patgram, an area long considered isolated and poor. In Patgram, local entrepreneur Mizanul Hoque, community leader Earshed Hossain, a large CSO (the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, or BRAC), and CIMMYT teamed up to bring better income-producing options to farmers.

Through a business arrangement called Doyal Agro Industrial Complex Limited (DAICOL) 2002, Hoque and Hossain hoped to create a farm-to-industry project. Thanks to rapidly growing demand for poultry feed, they lined up solid commitments within the country and Southeast Asia to purchase high-quality maize. DAICOL 2002 planned to sell seed provided by BRAC (Pacific 11, which contains CIMMYT germplasm) to Patgram's farmers, provide technical backstopping, and guarantee an attractive price at harvest.

Hoque says that when DAICOL 2002 went looking for "the best source of technical support available," they were consistently referred to CIMMYT. In 2002, through the USAID-funded Whole Family Training Project for Maize, Nur and his teams of trainers came on the scene. Aside from training farm families, Nur facilitated critical support from local banks for the DAICOL initiative. "Because farmers were assured a fixed price and market," says Nur, "the local banks were reassured that they could lend farmers enough money for seed and inputs, and get their money back."

Five years ago, only about 121 hectares of maize were planted in the Patgram and Hatibanda sub-districts. In early 2003, 1,821 hectares were planted, with 2,023 hectares anticipated for 2004 as farmers clamor to join the project.

"Based on this success," Nur continues, "we have a lot of interest from government and private banks in supporting farmers and constructing a large drying and silo facility. USAID has pledged technical support for training people to work at the silo. So we can see the economic ball rolling for the area."

Aside from direct gains to farmers, 20 skilled and 40 unskilled people will be needed to run the silo. Others will earn income transporting maize to the silo and providing inputs and services to farmers. All of this creates added economic spin-offs that are greatly welcomed here and fosters optimism that farmers can benefit from Asia's maize revolution.



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CIMMYT was "the best source of technical support" to train families to profit from maize production.

