Country: Bangladesh - Principal Organisation: CDA

ABSTRACT

Dalla villagers in Dinajpur, Bangladesh had lost their land to land grabbers. Through community mobilisation, occupation and utilisation of the land, and negotiating with the land administration office; the Organisation has successfully recovered 11.82 acres of khas land and 8 water bodies, benefiting up to 120 households.

ILC COMMITMENTS

- Secure Tenure Rights
- Diverse Tenure Systems
- Effective Actions Against Land Grabbing
Dalla Village is a small community located in Chirirbandar, Dinajpur District, Bangladesh. Like all other villages in pre-independence Bangladesh (British India), Dalla Village was subject to the “Zaminadari” system, a land revenue system under British colonial rule that created an aristocracy that collected revenue on behalf of the British colonial rulers from local peasants. Post-independence, the Zaminadari system was abolished under the Bangladesh Land Reform Ordinance 1984, and their lands became classified as Khas (public) land that local peasants could reclaim and occupy. About 1000 acres of former Zaminadari land and several water bodies became available for Dalla peasants. However, in subsequent decades, social elites began to engage in land grabbing, evicting peasants and subjecting them to labour and sharecropping contract. 11.82 acres of khas land, including 2.99 acres of homestead land and 8.83 acres of water bodies, were identified as grabbed land with falsified title deeds registered with the district land records office.

The removal of the Zaminadari system and redistribution of khas land requires high political commitment and effective government follow up; yet there is a lack of political will from the government. A majority of the land is still in the hands of a few people: about 71% of cultivable land is owned by 22% of the population, who are either rich or absentee landowners, compared to 5% of land owned by 45% of the population, consisting of small and subsistence farmers. About 40% of rural people are landless yet millions of hectares of khas land is still undistributed. Land related conflicts in Bangladesh are rooted in the absence of any meaningful post-independence land reform: the unavailability of policy related information, lack of implementation measures and land grabbing facilitated by government officials have all contributed to the marginalisation of peasant farmers.
Dalla village peasants negotiated with the Parishad Union (local government) to intervene against the land grabbers, yet their pleas fell on deaf ears. With the assistance of CDA, the peasants mobilised themselves to resist share-cropping and illegal land occupation by elite land grabbers. In 2014, under the Sustainable Organization for Land Rights and Agrarian Reform (SOLAR) program, CDA assisted the peasants to form community based self-help groups and community organisations, with a view to build unity, cooperation, and encourage inclusive planning.

CDA assisted the peasants to form the DallaJonosongothon organisation, consisting of 110 members, and divided into 4 sub-levels, led by 2 men and 2 women. CDA trained DallaJonosongothon Organisation in different skills, including strategies for engaging and negotiating with the local government, elaborating legislative functions, strategies for defending their land rights, and legal support.

As a result of the work of CDA and DallaJonosongothon Organisation, the Dalla community took possession of 11.82 hectares of land and water bodies that were grabbed. The land was parcelled for the benefit of 45 households—25 Indigenous, 15 Muslim and 5 Hindu households, and the water bodies were put under collective management of the Organisation, benefitting 120 households. DallaJonosongothon Organisation used the community’s financial resources to undertake fishing and animal farming projects, sharing the profits with local households and landless community members.

DallaJonosongothon Organisation and CDA continued to negotiate with the land administration officials for recognition of the peasants’ land rights. Finally, the District Land Administration Office granted the peasant households leases over the land and water bodies. Dalla community members’ livelihoods have improved and incomes increased.
Community assessment and formation of Community Organisations. CDA has been working with peasants as part of its ongoing programme with landless people. Based on their knowledge of the peasant communities, they selected Dalla Village as the most suitable community for mobilisation according to their action plan. They selected landless poor people, grouping them into small groups called Samities, and engaging them on land grabbing and potential solutions.

Unification of village level Samities. CDA's mobilised all Samities from different villages and unified them based on their capacities and organisational needs. The organisation began to mobilise their resources and develop strategies and integrated plans for defending their land rights. Dallajonosongothon Organisation also strengthened its collaborations with other civil society organisations working to protect peasant land rights against land grabbers.

Capacity building. CDA used their experience with other POs to build the capacities of Dallajonosongothon Organisation. They provided trainings on the sustainable management of organizations, leadership development, strategies for recovering and defending land, and the role of land administration officials in the process of recovering grabbed land. Most importantly, CDA taught the peasants how to network with other organisations working in the field, and how to engage in effective and research based advocacy, campaigning and communication.

Network building, advocacy and campaigning. Based on their newly acquired skills, Dallajonosongothon Organisation and all the unified peasant Samities mobilised themselves and began to identify grabbed khas land. They drafted a memorandum based on the information that they collected, and used the memorandum to engage the Parishad Union. They also delivered their memorandum to police officials, land administration officials, and district and sub-district officials. With the assistance of CDA, they engaged in a media campaign and organised meetings with the press.

Legal support. Dallajonosongothon Organisation and peasants occupied water bodies and khas land that was grabbed by the social elite. Consequently, land grabbers started threatening and physically assaulting the peasants, and interrupting their daily farming, social and religious activities. Between 2002 and 2015, peasants' homes were burnt, and false criminal cases were lodged against the peasants. CDA worked the media to raise awareness of the injustices meted out on the Dalla community.
Community mobilisation must include sensitisation of the community about their land rights, trainings on how to conduct negotiations, and strategies to access and engage with land administration officials. Armed with the right skills, peasant and community organisations have the power to recover their land, defend their human dignity and rights to decent livelihoods.

In order to recover lost land, it is important to use an inclusive approach that involves all stakeholders. Recovering grabbed land can take a long time, especially where the land grabbers have land title, which is prima facie evidence of legal ownership. The community organisations must prioritise cooperation with other land rights actors, strengthening leadership, good governance and working with local peasants.

Most importantly, the work of the community organisations must contribute to discourse on land and agrarian policy reform. A seemingly isolated incident can inspire other peasants to defend their land rights, pressuring the government to act on the demands of the community.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Community mobilisation must include sensitisation of the community about their land rights, trainings on how to conduct negotiations, and strategies to access and engage with land administration officials. Armed with the right skills, peasant and community organisations have the power to recover their land, defend their human dignity and rights to decent livelihoods.
FIND OUT MORE

Learning from NES Bangladesh. Good Practices from a Multi-Stakeholder Platform -

Halting land grabbing by local elite through sustained legal action -

Twenty years of legal struggle to obtain ownership of public ‘khas’ -

Bangladesh Country Strategy -
http://www.landcoalition.org/en/regions/asia/resources/bangladesh-country-strategy

Bangladesh Country Brochure -