

EKN field trip to Katalyst projects around Jessore

On 8 December an EKN delegation (Doris Voorbraak, Miriam Otto and Mushfiqua Satiar) plus our colleague from The Hague, Louise Huijbens (Bangladesh desk officer), visited three projects of Katalyst. Katalyst aims to improve the competitiveness of business in Bangladesh especially within sectors with high growth potential in terms of jobs, productivity, and profitability. Since 2003 EKN is a donor of Katalyst, the other donors are the Swiss SDC, UK DFID and Canadian CIDA.

The main purpose of this field visit was for the partly new EKN team to get a better understanding of the impact of Katalyst's work on the ground. To this end, we visited projects in three sectors: a shrimp depot and farm, an ICT centre, and we had a discussion with members of a BMO (business membership organization).

Shrimps

Shrimp is the second largest export earning sector of Bangladesh and the topmost agro-export sector. There are quite a few challenges related to the production and the market aspects of prawn sector, such as insufficient supply of quality prawn feed, lack of information and limited access to modern cultivation techniques. We spoke with Mr. Tapan, a depot owner in Monirampur, to learn about how Katalyst affected his life and work and that of his clients, the shrimp farmers. We also visited a shrimp farm, to see the labour intensive work with our own eyes.



Shrimp depot



Meeting the depot owner



Catching shrimps

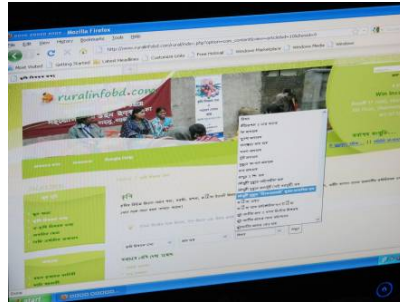


The result!

As a depot owner, Mr. Tapan has direct connections with shrimp farmers, who sell their goods to him, and with the main buyer and exporter of shrimps, a processing plant. Since 2006 Mr. Tapan has collaborated with Katalyst. He received training from Katalyst and became a useful source of information for the shrimp farmers in his area. He also provided some farmers with credits, so that they could produce more, which eventually also helps his business as a depot owner. Mr. Tapan also informed us about the way Katalyst is helping him to find solutions for the increasingly difficult weather circumstances: since the rainy season starts earlier in the year, the shrimps have less time to grow bigger.

ICT

In rural Bangladesh, farmers and SME's regularly need information on farming methods, crop diseases, new markets, better business practices, etc. ICT centres serve the local communities with these kinds of information and services. Katalyst facilitates over 500 Community Information Centres (CIC), established by GrameenPhone, to improve the sector competitiveness in key rural and urban sectors. In Chougacha, we spoke with the entrepreneur of the local ICT centre, some of his clients, and GrameenPhone employees who support this centre with technical and logistical services. We got a better view of the usefulness of CICs for farmers. The centre operator provides them with the necessary information from the websites; the farmers can use the computers and print out relevant information for a small fee. For GrameenPhone this is a good investment too, because the farmers who will come to seek information are exposed to other Grameen services (for example mobile telephony) at the same time.



Improving local government services through BMOs

Bangladeshi farmers, due to various constraints, have limited access to local government departments. Katalyst works to improve local government services, by linking up existing farmer associations (“Samities”) to Business Membership Organizations (BMOs) at Upazila level. BMOs have the capacity to raise farmers’ issues with local government service providers. We spoke with a group of farmers and the trader who is their BMO spokesperson. We learned how the trader had helped the farmers with getting a bank loan collectively, which they could not have obtained individually. Because of their longstanding trading relation, the trader was confident enough to be the guarantor for the farmers’ bank loan. He also helps them with administrative and other procedural issues.

