

Report on
JIBIKA MELA
A fair on life and living of char dwellers
24-25 February 2006

Submitted to:
actionaid bangladesh

Development Wheel (DEW)

House # 8/5 (Ground floor), Road # 01
Shyamoli, Dhaka-1207
Tel: 811 5579, Fax: 913 5499
Email: dewhc@bdonline.com
Web: www.developmentwheel.org

Sponsored by: **actionaid** bangladesh

Development Wheel (DEW)

JIBIKA MELA

A fair on life and living of char dwellers

Introduction:

Char are strips of land arising out of the riverbed or sea which are inhabited by people. Chars generally are very beautiful and peaceful, though life and living there mean hardship due to absence of basic facilities and services. River erosion, floods, and drought are the regular natural phenomenon of those riverine areas of Bangladesh. It is estimated that 5% of the total population of Bangladesh live in chars under very difficult conditions and 80% these people are extreme poor. Their isolation among themselves and also from the mainstream development initiatives leaves them continuously deprived.

The char dwellers being resilient and productive work hard to make a livelihood for themselves with the minimum support they get. Annual deposits of silt, flooding and cleaning of land means some areas can be very fertile and suitable for organic productions.

Chars do have many resources, the lack of information transformation, lack of good communication mean that policy makers and development workers are often unaware of this and that is why the socio-economic condition of the char dwellers is largely unchanged.

Of late, there have been some activities initiated by the Government and NGOs to facilitate socio-economic development of the people of the chars. Char dwellers have also responded with their limited capacity. Most importantly, women have also joined their hands with their male folks in transforming the problems to potentials that the nation can benefit from.

To raise awareness of the wealth and opportunities of the chars and char dwellers to the world, Development Wheel (DEW) recently organized a fair in a char. The fair titled "**Jibika Mela**" meaning **Livelihood Fair** is the first ever fair of this type in Bangladesh. DEW organized the fair in a char island of the river Jamuna under district of Jamalpur named Char Nolshunda of Sharishabari Upazilla in 24th and 25th of February 2006.



Women and men's are coming from different chars to Jibika Mela to across two rivers and walking 3 km of sandy track

JIBIKA MELA: The Fair

Organizing a fair in the rural areas is an age-old tradition in Bangladesh. Back in thirties to seventies, when there were not enough marketing outlets/shops in the rural area, most of the char dwellers/villagers used to buy their necessities for the whole year from the rural fair. Fairs were also an indispensable part of Bengali folk and cultural heritage of the country.

As infrastructure and outlets have developed, country fairs have become less common. But the message of the fair in the chars still touches the mind of the people and reminds them of age-old tradition and culture of Bengali heritage and creates a festive mood and environment. The fair is also an effective means of introducing new products and producers.



Chief Guest, Special guest and other guests are floral welcomed by the char girls

The aims of the Jibika Mela were:

- Bringing the Dwellers of different chars in a common place so that they can share their knowledge, ideas and experiences among themselves
- Creating a common platform for local, national and international development workers and Government officials so that they can share their knowledge, ideas and experiences with different char dwellers
- Display char specialties like vegetables, spices, fruits and other organic items, fishes, poultry, birds, cattle, handicrafts, livestock and some other special crops which can be grown particularly well in these chars such as different types of corns, pulses, potato and sweet potato, peanut etc.
- Build links between char dwellers, private sector and govt. departments for products and services
- Celebrate the richness of the traditional Bengali Fair with cultural events and present char based culture; traditional songs, drama, etc. performances by char youth group and national level folk singers.



Wing Commander Tobarak Hossain, Deputy General Manager of PRAN group speaking in the inaugural session and crowd in front of the stalls

Background to Organizing the Fair:

DEW carried out a 19 months long research exercise in 2002 to 2004 with the char dwellers of the villages named Char Nolshunda and Char Kulpal on Jamuna river. The research was named "An actor oriented approach to natural resources sector value addition: investigating post-harvest networks and coalitions to enhance livelihoods in the Bangladeshi char lands" and was funded by the Department of International Development DFID/CPHP/NRI. A group of dedicated and well experienced professionals were engaged with that research; they were British anthropologist and land and water resource specialist Harriet Matseart, Bengali anthropologist Dr. Zahir Ahmed, agriculture-economist Monzur Aziz, anthropologist Faruque Hosen and Nousin Islam and sociologist Shah Abdus Salam. The research found that char dwellers are keen to develop their natural resource based enterprises and see opportunities to develop their production of livestock and horticultural crops. There is also potential for organic production in the char areas. A constraint to develop these industries is poor linkage with national level buyers and processors and with service providers and input suppliers.



Farmers are bringing their best products for display and for the competition

DEW: the Organizer:

Development Wheel (DEW), the lead organizer, is a non-government development organization established in 1996 to promote self-help poverty alleviation initiatives of the poorest towards sustainable improvement of their livelihood. DEW has been working with the dwellers of Jamuna chars in Jamalpur District since 1997. Over the last eight years, the organization extended multifaceted development supports and services to the vulnerable households.

The services include small scale micro-credit, skills development training in poultry, cow and goat rearing, homestead gardening, hand embroidery and facilitating market outlet, inputs supply and actor oriented research activities in the field of agriculture. Among these crosscutting areas of interventions, DEW has always put high priority on the financial and non-financial business development support of micro-enterprise and other economic development activities in the chars.



It was first ever opportunity for them to display their products in a decorative stalls with electric light

Observing the Fair: From Heart to Heart:

Participants of the fair were many and included the member organizations of Sharishabari Char Development network (SCDN), Agriculture, Livestock, Water and Soil Resource departments of GOB, Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute BARI, ECOTA Fair Trade Forum, RDSM, Practical Action, Action Aid Bangladesh, JIBIKA, Speed Trust, NGO Forum for drinking water and sanitation, Traid Craft Exchange, Steps Towards Development, PRAN Group, PUP, Podokhep Manobik Unnoyon Sanghta and some other local organizations. Besides, a huge number of local producers came to the fair with their products.



Innovations by the char dwellers and entertainment for the childrens

The main things displayed in the fair were, agricultural products like vegetables, spices, seeds, fruits and food items; aquatic catches like fish, shells; home birds like chicken, duck, animals and animal products like egg, milk, curd; handicrafts like hand embroideries, stitches and home made products; local agricultural tools and equipments; information, technical supports, assistance and services; local fair specialties like dolls, toys, fans, kite, paper flowers, ornaments, local hand made foods like sweets and other things.

Besides, DEW organized development video show and whole night cultural program.

Speech from Inaugural Ceremony:

DEW organized a very colorful inaugural ceremony of the fair. The honorable state minister of the **Ministry of Finance and Planning Major General (Rtd.) Anwarul Kabir Talukdar** was the chief guest and Deputy Commissioner of Jamalpur Mr. Mohammed Hanif and TNO of Sharishabari Mr. Alamin was the special guest of the ceremony. Mr. Nick Taylor, First Secretary, Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh and representatives from Action Aid Bangladesh was present the occasion.



Chief guest Maj. General (Rtd.) Anwarul Kabir Talukdar, State Minister for Finance and Planning and Mr. Shah Abdus Salam, Executive Director of DEW delivering their opening speech in the Jibika Mela

Mr. Talukdar in his speech thanked Development Wheel for taking the initiatives of the first ever Jibika Mela in Bangladesh. He also said that as a son of this upazilla he always tried to do something good for the char dwellers. He also informed that the govt. has taken a project named "Char Livelihood Project" with the help of the Local Govt. and Rural Development Ministry and Department For International Development (DFID) for the development of livelihoods, infrastructure and business of the char dwellers of five districts of this area. He also said that the char dwellers of some places have already started to get the benefits of that project and he hoped that char dwellers of this area would get the benefits very soon. He hoped that different national and international level actors will get the chance of realizing the real char life and livelihoods from this fair; char dwellers will get some new information and knowledge from the participants; the national level processors will get a chance of meeting directly with the producers; development workers will get a new field of their work. He hoped that it might create an access to new national and international market for the char productions and they might get the right price of their productions and labors.

In his welcome note **Mr. Shah Abdus Salam**, Executive Director of DEW thanked all national and international participants and guests to attend the fair. He said that it is very difficult to come in such an inaccessible place (participants from the mainland had come by boat and then walked 2 km along a sandy track to reach the fair); but the reality is, people are living in this place with all the difficulties. It is not possible for us to realize these things without coming here. People have to live here with all the natural disasters like flood and riverbank erosions. They have to change their living place, they loss all their wealth in these disasters. One of the aims of organizing this fair in this place was to introduce the outsiders to these things. He said that, DEW has been working with the char for many years. He informed that from the study, DEW found that there are many opportunities in these chars. They are trying to introduce the special crops of the chars and they are also giving training and credit facilities to the char dwellers. They have also formed the "Sharishabari Char Development Network"(SCDN) with all the local development organizations to make development works much better and effective. He also said that the aim of organizing this fair was to make a direct linkage with different actors, development workers and national processors, so that the char producers would get the right price of their products

and would get the needed services and facilities from different govt. and non-govt. departments. He also thanked all participants, char dwellers, communica for their technical assistance and especially to **Action Aid Bangladesh** for their assistance to organize the first ever **Jibika Mela** for the char dwellers.



Livestock and agricultural products displayed in the char based producer's stalls

Key Learning from the Jibika Mela:

- It is possible to organize a **Jibika Mela** even in such an inaccessible place with the support and assistance of local people
- It provides a **great platform** to exchange and sheering of ideas and develop positive linkages for char dwellers every year
- It could be a great **annual development festival** for the char dwellers and this is their heartiest demand to the organizer from all the participants and visitors.



Char based folk singers and national level folk singer Zahir Alim performing in the stage of Jibika Mela

Observation:

- We have to express that we did not get expected response from many who talk for standing by the distress. But we could not ignore the urges and interests shown by the people. But this is not an end and we hope to get more support from all the stakeholders in future events in chars with char dwellers.
- It's really sad that no one from the DFID funded Chars Livelihoods programme attended the fair.

Prizes:



Best livestock and women entrepreneur prize distribution in the picture

DEW awarded prizes in five categories aiming to recognize in the achievements of the char producers and other groups. These were best agricultural product, best livestock, best women entrepreneur, best handicraft producer, best cultural team and a special prize. The prizes were television set for each category.

Some pectoral views of the Jibika Mela



Demonstration of hygienic sanitation system and model char village by the participating organizations



A proud chilli producer of char Nolshunda



Refreshment on hot sandy beach!



Char dwellers and mainland people are coming from different parts to across the rivers to participate the first ever Jibika Mela for them



Visitors are looking handicraft products in the stalls



End of the color and joyful two memorable days in char dwellers life! Could they get back the days again! Yes this is first ever beginning! We will come back to you again every year!!!!!!