

## EMPOWERMENT:

*to give  
power or  
authority to*

# Cultivating Futures

*Empowerment is about enabling people to improve their own lives and the lives and futures of their children. It is about vesting individuals and communities with power and capability. This is a story of an agriculture project in Bangladesh in which people develop the knowledge and skills to take charge of their futures.*

**I**n the sprawling delta of the Indian subcontinent lies the land of the Bangla people. Nearly 130 million humans – half the population of the United States – are compressed into a space smaller than Georgia.

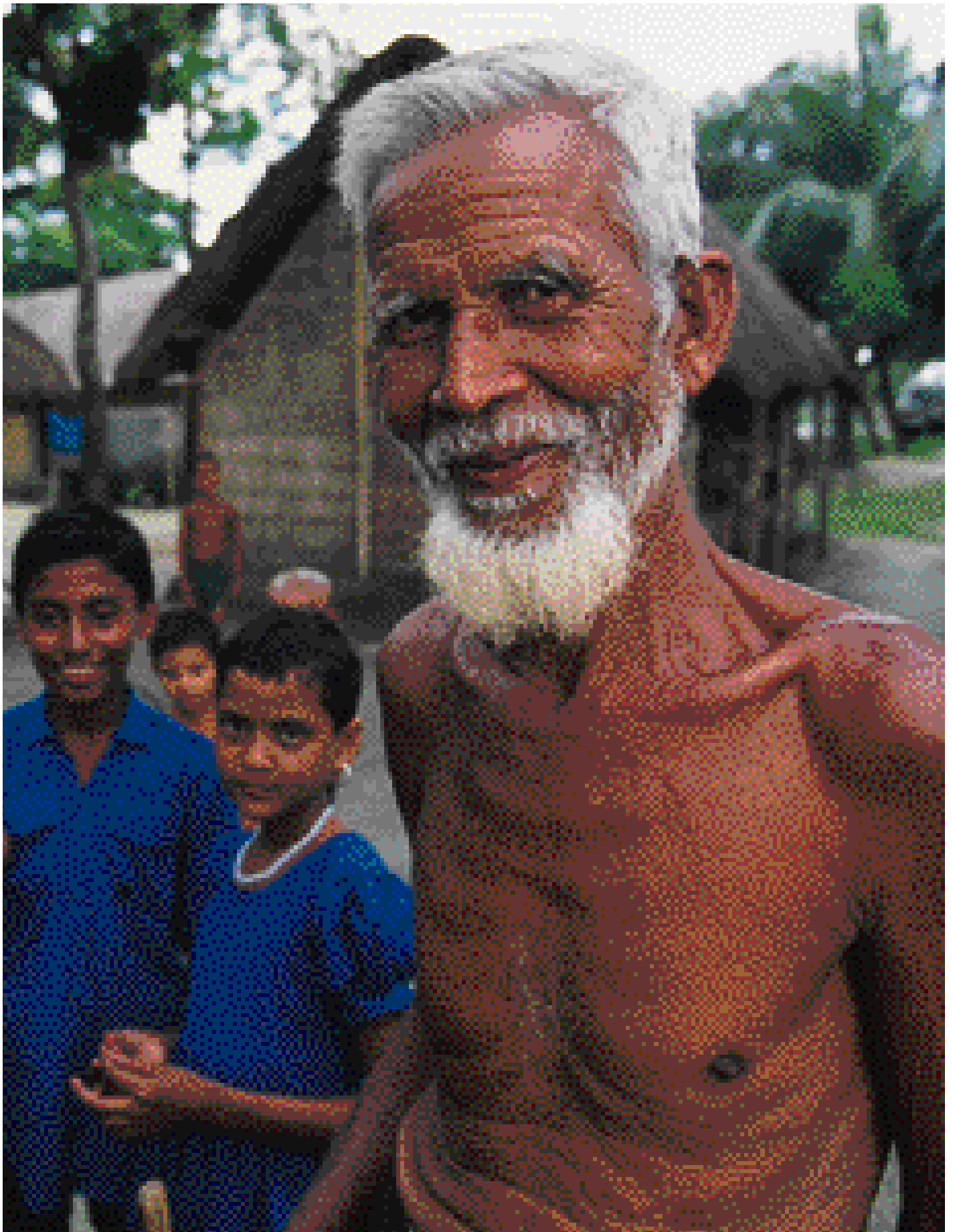
More than half live in absolute poverty on less than \$1 per day. Food is precious in this low-lying land. The nation toils unceasingly to feed itself. Malnutrition is rampant, particularly in rural areas, where 80 percent of people live. Poverty and crowding make space a premium and survival a constant preoccupation.

CARE concentrates most of its efforts to reduce poverty and promote self-reliance in Bangladesh in the poorest rural communities, in villages such as Dhamgaon, where Shamsul Haque lives.

Haque, a rice farmer by trade, conquered poverty and banished malnutrition from his household, enriching his family's life by using solutions he learned in a school for farmers run by CARE.



*(left) CARE helps fight malnutrition by supporting farmers' efforts to raise fish in rice paddies. (right) Smiles abound in Dhamgaon, Bangladesh, where farmers learned the benefits of diversifying crops.*





*To feed a hungry nation, rice seemingly is grown everywhere, even along the flooded banks of the mighty Jamuna River.*

Field schools such as the one Haque attended are part of a project called NOPEST (New Options for Pest Management), which was created initially to curtail pesticide use – a threat to public health and the environment in Bangladesh. After its inception, NOPEST was broadened to include topics ranging from introducing new agricultural techniques to self- and community-development.

When Haque began his studies through the CARE field school in 1996, he only planted rice – the staple in the Bangladeshi diet – in his tiny paddies. Haque learned about agricultural diversification, maximizing land use, and the danger pesticides bring to people and land. Haque and those in his school were encouraged to choose group leaders. They discovered the value of working together as a community, unifying for a common goal. The field schools also challenge and enable men and women to learn



from one another by trying different methods to improve their chances for success.

“We know now it helps us if we experiment, so we can see for ourselves and decide for ourselves what works best for us,” Haque says through a translator. His eyes shine with pride, as he cites examples of their determination. “We know now if we work together, we all will benefit.”

### The Rewards of Diligence

Today, Haque’s farm is a showcase of agricultural innovation, one of many similar success stories. Visitors are welcomed to tour his Dhamgaon farm, about 50 miles north of Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital.

Haque’s training empowered him to cultivate a resource that had been underfoot all along. For centuries, hundreds of thousands of narrow earthen dikes crisscrossing the countryside were used to retain water and form boundaries between villagers’ plots. But the dikes themselves were used for little more than foot traffic.

The field school taught Haque to use the dikes for growing crops. On their own, Haque and other graduates experimented to identify species that would flourish. Hundreds of cucumber vines now climb from the sides of Haque’s dikes onto hand-made bamboo and jute trellises suspended over murky water and swaying rice. Gourds and squash mingle with cucumbers. Where his dikes have been widened and raised, beans, papaya, eggplant, turmeric, ginger and herbs flourish.

Another field school technique involves raising fish in rice paddies. In fact, the NOPEST rice-fish program is one of the project’s key accomplishments. Significant fish production is made possible by pooling a large number of once-separate adjacent rice fields. Cooperation among individuals benefits communities.

The protein-rich fish, combined with new crops of vegetables and fruits, are making a positive impact on nutrition in Dhamgaon. It is a palpable contrast to the villagers’ rice-reliant diets of the past – diets that often were severely deficient in calories, nutrients and protein. As malnutrition fades, health improves.

What Haque, his family and his community do not eat, they sell. The commerce brings them *takas*, the currency of Bangladesh, and economic empowerment. Money

*(left to right) Tiny fish are used to stock rice paddies. Bangladeshi women and children benefit from improved nutrition through CARE agricultural programs.*



in hand offers purchasing power for food, clothing, shelter, land and opportunities to save for the future.

At the same time, marketing fish and vegetables exposes farmers to other villages and towns, broadening perspectives, prompting exchanges of knowledge and enriching communities.

The field schools ultimately are teaching more than agriculture. As the rows of dikes teem with crops, new and diverse life in and along the paddies is fostering economic, social and intellectual change.

### Ever-widening Results

In Bangladesh and around the world, CARE-supported projects are effective vehicles for people determined to escape poverty. They are striving for a better life. New goals are being set and reached.

“This is beyond our imagination,” says Haque, who happily accepts the mantle of local “Cucumber King.”

“Five years ago, I would not think this possible,” he says. “We have worked hard, but CARE started this.”

Haque is now a leader in the community association he and other Dhamgaon field school graduates formed three years ago. They organized and chose leaders, as they had done in the field school.

Today in Dhamgaon, this independent farmers’ association – one of many that are outgrowths of CARE projects – is going beyond the farming techniques taught in the field school. Camaraderie and information exchanges are growing.

Collectively, the members of the association are able to buy better quality seed at lower prices and to market crops at higher prices. No one wants to be left out; Haque’s original field school group of 25 has become an association of 145.

Broader forms of empowerment – traceable to the farmer field schools – also are materializing in Dhamgaon. Commerce is blossoming, and individuals now tend to pool their takas and other resources to meet common goals. Farmers, for instance, plan to buy a vehicle to take vegetables to market thereby eliminating middlemen.

The people of Dhamgaon are not alone in pooling their resources. In nearby Kuripara, farmers used their new-found assets to build a mosque. A cemetery is next.

“In the beginning, we did not realize the potential of what CARE was trying to teach us,” says Badsha Mia, a farmer and community leader in Kuripara. “Now we are making money



*(left) Smiles of Bangladeshi children offer little due to the widespread poverty and frequent threat of natural disasters.  
(right) Shamsul Haque mends trellises that allow cucumbers to grow above his rice paddies.*



with our crops and saving money, not buying pesticide.”

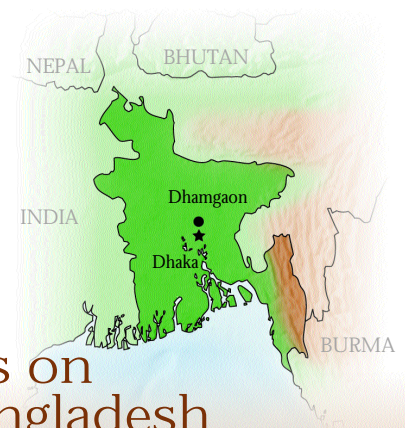
“About 90 percent of those who have completed the farmer field school program did not use pesticide last year,” says Laila Banu, assistant project coordinator for NOPEST. “This allows natural predators of destructive insects to regenerate, and farmers can use their resources elsewhere.”

“We teach people how to solve their own problems,” says Debashis Saha, a CARE technical officer. “We assist them to use their skills to empower themselves.”

At CARE offices in Dhaka, Marco Barzman, NOPEST’s coordinator, issues this summary: “The empowerment here is that people started to work together to do things that they were unable to do before. For instance, Dhangaon farmers now bargain as a group with vegetable buyers, getting a better price and locating buyers even before planting their crops. There’s been an explosion of these collective activities.”

Numbers provided by the “Cucumber King” support that assertion. Five years after the experiment to grow cucumbers by the members of Haque’s field school, more than 500 men and women in the area are cultivating them – and their families’ futures.

— Article by K.E. Morgan;  
Photography by Billy Howard



## facts on bangladesh

Two-thirds of children in Bangladesh are malnourished.

Bangladesh’s annual per capita income is \$386.

Since 1995, CARE’s NOPEST program has provided training to more than 30,000 farmers in 1,560 field schools.

CARE Bangladesh has 3,013 staff members - more than 99% are Bangladeshi.

One-third of Bangladesh floods annually during the monsoon season.