

Social inclusion of Dalit and Adibashi

Context

Bangladesh became independent in 1971. Despite economic growth and major social advances, for example in health and education, the country is still plagued by political instability and corruption. Located in the world's largest river delta and rising to just a few metres above sea level, Bangladesh is also flood-prone. Besides, it experiences regular tropical typhoons. This is all the more dramatic when it is considered that Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries. The ongoing economic upswing is not benefitting everyone, however. More specifically, the Dalit, called casteless, and Adibashi, who belong to the indigenous population, face exclusion and discrimination in society. Their fundamental human rights are not realized and they are bypassed by the benefits of economic growth. HEKS/EPER support targets these social, ethnic and religious minorities, focusing on the north-western part of the country where there are some 1.5 million Dalit and about 350,000 Adibashi. The country programme is aimed at the social inclusion of these vulnerable groups, promoting greater enjoyment of equal rights and equal economic opportunities. In addition, HEKS/EPER also provides emergency and reconstruction aid after natural disasters.

Objectives, priorities, activities

The overall goal of the HEKS/EPER country programme Bangladesh 2017-2020 is to strive towards the social inclusion of Dalit and Adibashi in Northwest Bangladesh. The focus on the marginalized Dalit and Adibashi communities confirms HEKS/EPER's commitment to engage with the most vulnerable groups. It is a continuation of the previous phase with the same goal and focus. It strives at consolidating





successful practices, reaching out to more communities, bringing about systemic change, and enhancing the sustainability.

In order to achieve social inclusion of Dalit and Adibashi in the Northwest it is fundamental that the (O1) PooC communities are enabled to claim their rights and fulfil their obligations, so that they can be active participants of the society; (O2) enjoy equal rights and have access to services, whereby (O3) a secured access to land is particularly important; and are given equal economic opportunities in order to (O4) improve their economic status, to benefit from the country's economic development and to contribute to a more inclusive growth. Working toward social inclusion requires addressing grievances and conflicts between the minority and majority groups in society. In this regard, HEKS/EPER aims at (O5) an improved relationship with the mainstream society; which is inherently linked to (O6) an improved security of PooC communities.

Bangladesh is one of the most disaster prone countries in the world and will become even more so as a result of climate change. Therefore, the programme has a strong focus on building up the resilience of communities. Vulnerable groups such as Dalit and plain land Adibashi shall be better prepared for natural disasters and be included in relevant government bodies for disaster preparedness. In case of an emergency, HEKS/EPER responds to the humanitarian needs of the most affected people.

Target groups

Activities under the country programme directly benefit some 40,000 Dalit and Adibashi, while all Dalit and Adibashi in north-western Bangladesh benefit indirectly from lobbying and advocacy campaigns.

Dalit are considered as «untouchables», as the pariahs of local society, and suffer from systematic discrimination and exclusion. They are extremely disadvantaged both socially and economically: poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and malnutrition are part of their daily life. Owing to the extreme discrimination and lack of education, Dalit have little chance of finding decently paid work. They do the lowest forms of work such as cleaning streets, sewers, as well as public and private latrines, and are disposing carcasses.

The Adibashi are indigenous peoples and originally forest dwellers, gatherers and hunters who have now lost the basis of their livelihood, the forest, owing to its commercialization and development. Today they try to survive as day labourers in the fields of land owners, and live in extreme poverty. Their political and cultural rights are violated and some Adibashi villages are under threat from radical Islamist groups.

Partnerships, networks, alliances, memberships

In Bangladesh, HEKS/EPER works with five local partner organizations and one international organization. The partners working in north-western Bangladesh are the Eco Social Development Organization (ESDO), «Gram Bikash Kendra» (GBK), the Association for Rural Cooperation (ARCO), Service Emergency for Rural People (SERP) and the Network of Non-mainstream Marginalized Communities (NNMC). In international advocacy, HEKS/EPER works with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN).

HEKS/EPER is a member of various networks that promote synergies, better coordination and information and experience sharing. In Bangladesh, HEKS/EPER is



a member of Citizen's Platform for SDGs, the Market Development Forum, Act Alliance as well as the INGO knowledge network. Besides, HEKS/EPER maintains close ties with other international and Swiss NGOs and with international organizations such as UNDP.

HEKS/EPER on the ground

HEKS/EPER operates a coordination office in Dhaka with a coordinator and seven other staff members. The team supports and accompanies partner organizations in implementing HEKS/EPER-funded projects and is also directly involved in various advocacy activities.

Topics and working approach

The discrimination of Dalit and Adibashi is manifold and lasting for many generations. This requires a holistic perspective to understand the complexity of social exclusion. And it requires systemic working approaches to address the variety of barriers and constraints preventing these communities from being citizens with equal rights and equal opportunities. The overarching approach of the CP is the human rights-based approach (HRBA), while an inclusive market development approach is applied in creating economic opportunities and the diapraxis approach contributes to improve the relationship among the Dalit and Adibashi groups and between them and the mainstream society. The cross-cutting issues are gender, resilience building and conflict sensitivity.

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