



Report of the International Conference on
Addressing Barriers to Rice Seeds Trade between India and Bangladesh
(RISTE Project)

22nd December 2013, BRAC Centre Inn, Dhaka, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

CUTS International (India) in association with Unnayan Shamannay (Bangladesh) organised a day's international conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 22nd December 2013. The purpose was to present the findings of the Project 'Addressing Barriers to Rice seeds Trade between India and Bangladesh' supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In addition, the workshop also intended to facilitate the discussions among stakeholders and to come out with suggestions for a better cooperative regime between India and Bangladesh relating to rice seeds. The Project is being implemented in four eastern states of India (Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal) and in Bangladesh.

2. Workshop Structure and Participants

Besides the opening and closing sessions, the workshop was structured into three technical sessions and consisted of (1) Benefits and Constraints of Rice Seeds Trade and Knowledge Sharing; (2) Discussion on Advocacy Strategy and Media Outreach; and (3) Discussion on Future Activities and Expected Outcomes. However, often it was noted that discussion in the sessions covered wider areas and was not strictly confined to the specified session courses.

The workshop was attended by around 110 participants from India and Bangladesh comprising of government officials, subject experts, seeds associations, media, besides representatives from Unnayan Shamannay, CUTS International, and four Project Partners involved in the Project. The meeting was also attended by members of the Project Advisory Committee (PAC). Some of the dignitaries who participated in the workshop were Mahabub Hossain, Executive Director, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Dhaka; Anwar Faruque, Additional Secretary and Director General, Seed Wing, Bangladesh; Swapan Kumar Datta, Deputy Director General, Indian Council of Agricultural Research; Sushil Pandey, Former Senior Scientist, International Rice Research Institutes; among others.

During the day long workshop, besides the three technical sessions focusing on improving cooperation between the two countries in rice seeds, several issues pertinent to the seed industry in Bangladesh and India were discussed. Some of the important issues that were covered included rice seeds and its importance, formalisation of trade in rice seeds and barriers to trade, benefits from such cooperation and measures therein, intellectual properties and farmers' rights, harmonisation of acts, policies and regulations, cooperation between research institutions. Besides issues, such as laboratory testing and chemical testing; labelling requirements; registration of trading permits; quarantine requirements; sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) requirements; India requiring bio-security and import permits, which

Bangladeshi exporters consider complex were also discussed. Stakeholders' views and perceptions along with some highlights from the presentations made on those issues are briefly delineated below.

3. Major Issues Discussed in the Workshop

a. Rice seeds and its importance

Most of the speakers and participants were of the view that rice seed is a very sensitive issue; it is, in fact, lifeline of farmers. If farmers make a wrong selection of seeds, all costs incurred goes in vain. And therefore, any aspect related to trade and/or cooperation in rice seeds should be dealt with caution. Besides, seed is one example of linkage between farmers and scientific communities. It can be noted that both the countries (especially Bangladesh) are facing lots of challenges as the current production is not enough considering the next 5-10 years. It is also difficult to ensure easy availability and accessibility to the farmers. Moreover, constant improvement in technology has helped Bangladesh to feed growing population. Considering its importance and not unexpectedly, for Bangladesh, seed will be a thrust sector in the years to come.

Similarly, in India, a large number of farmers are yet to benefit from new innovations and variety releases. This causes low yield and productivity. This situation can be improved by transferring latest technology embedded in seeds to farmers. Increasing and sustained availability and accessibility to variety rice seeds can effectively address the issue of low yield.

b. Barriers to trade in variety rice seeds

It is noted that there is no trade in inbred rice varieties, despite the fact that trade in hybrid seeds is a recurring phenomenon between the two countries. Currently, Bangladesh imports 80 percent of its jute seeds from India; it also imports vegetable seeds from India but does not imports rice seeds, as there are no tariff barriers. Lack of trade in variety rice seeds is because of several reasons, including but not limited to lack of official acceptance emerging through issues, such as being a notified crop, intellectual properties and farmers' rights issues. It is suggested that if seed exchange and trade is good for the two countries, governments should think positively and facilitate this to happen. It is also noted by more than one participant that whether government wants it or not, informal trade is taking place as farmers get benefited from this.

Informal trade being a recurring phenomenon and with farmers benefiting from it calls for formalisation of trade in variety rice seeds. This can be achieved through greater participation of private sector, and public-private sector partnership. It is noted that many smaller countries have benefitted from trade from big countries. Similarly, both the countries can get benefit by trading with each other. For example, while India can also gain through importing *boro* variety from Bangladesh, which is doing reasonably well there. Bangladesh can also gain from cooperation and trade in suitable varieties that are doing well in India. Participants were at the consensus that trade in seeds can be a part of south-south cooperation. This process can be started with rice seeds and then can be extended to other seeds also.

Formalisation of rice seeds trade between the two countries, however, calls for development of a mechanism that allows good seeds from other countries. It will certainly help improvement in quality of local varieties, which will benefit farmers in the two countries.

Fortunately, things have started changing both in India and Bangladesh with regard to cooperation in rice and other seeds. Agriculture Ministry in India has shown its interest both to allow import and export of seeds from India. Indian Government has made it clear that private sector can export to private companies or government of any country, including Bangladesh. Similarly, Government of Bangladesh has also taken some initiatives in this direction. Signing of Material Transfer Agreement (MTA), under South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) by the two countries is one such example. This can facilitate germplasm exchange for research purposes, which can contribute into knowledge-sharing in rice seeds. In addition, there are also some positive developments taking place between eastern states in India and Bangladesh.

c. Benefits from such cooperation and measures therein

Seed exchange programme was there 1000 years ago, and continues even now. Informal trade in rice seeds between India and Bangladesh is a good example of this. And more importantly, such trade is continuing despite lack of promotion by the state machineries. As indicated above, one major reason for this is continued benefits farmers are deriving from such informal exchange of variety rice seeds. Formalisation of trade will result in efficiency gains and benefits to both the trading partners.

Both eastern part of India and Bangladesh share similar agro-climatic conditions, as well as similar farming practices. As it was observed in the field study that the farmers in border regions (especially in Bihar and West Bengal) crosses border without much hassle and exchange seeds and other products with their relatives and friends residing on other side of border. This has also forced the state governments of Indian bordering states to conduct field trials of well performing rice seeds varieties, which are coming from other side of the border informally. It was also expressed by the key stakeholders including top government officials in the state of Bihar that now state government is seriously considering the need for field trials of improved rice seeds varieties of Bangladesh to meet the increasing demand of rice seeds, for example, the initiation of cooperation in BR-9 variety.

d. Intellectual properties and farmers' rights

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) relating to development and release of variety rice seeds continues to be a contentious issue at the global level. It is true in case of India and Bangladesh as both India and Bangladesh have put in place their Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regimes, consistent with World Trade Organisation (WTO) and their local requirements. Variety rice seed is a typical example of transfer of technology to farmers. And such technology results from years of research and huge investments. In other words, seeds of improved rice varieties allow farmers to reap benefit from seed embedded technological progress through its repeated use.

Discussions with stakeholders revealed that, IPR and related issue might be one of most important reasons, which hinder formal trade in rice seeds between the two countries. Newly released rice seed varieties are usually subjected to patent, royalty, copy rights, and therefore import or export of seeds might not be a workable solution. There is need for both the governments to have an appropriate framework, which while protecting the interests of the developers, facilitates cooperation between the two countries. Fortunately for the farmers, the governments in the two countries have started discussions on promoting cooperation in varietal development, recognition of varieties, seed exchange and greater opening for cooperation.

It is noted that while it is easy to get and produce (multiply) seed but how to divide the benefits between the innovator, producer and farmer remains a challenge. Because of these reasons, seeds producers, governments are not keen in exchange of seeds. There are also opinions from Bangladesh that a publically developed variety should not be charged. If both the countries officially allow the exchange programme, farmers will be benefited. Such an arrangement will help the farmers in the two countries to choose best varieties.

e. Harmonisation of acts, policies and regulations

Towards harmonisation of acts, policies and regulations, there are already some initiatives being taken under SAARC. In 2009 SAARC countries came up with the idea to establish SAARC Agriculture Centre. This has resulted in setting up of SAARC Seed Forum and SAARC Seed Bank. One of the core areas of these institutions is to take initiative to harmonise acts, policies and regulations. Recently, SAARC with the support from IFC appointed consultant to work on harmonisation issue. It is expected that if it succeeds in harmonisation, it might help addressing all other issues for cooperation in this area.

At the bilateral level, there is a need to harmonise policies on barriers not only on rice seeds but also on other agriculture goods. Further, it can be noted that in February 2013, a meeting between the seed delegations of India and Bangladesh identified barriers as well as measures to address them. Several issues were discussed during the meeting comprising cooperation in varietal development, recognition of varieties, seed exchange, greater opening for cooperation.

Harmonisation initiative can move on starting with rice seeds and once it succeeds, it can then gradually move on to other goods. As developing a new variety is a long term process, initiatives for harmonisation and cooperation should focus on short term programmes/variety development. There is example of Swarna-Sub 1 and BR-51, which were developed within a period of two years through cooperation between Bangladesh and India, with IRRI playing a major role.

Another major initiative towards harmonisation is signing of Material Transfer Agreement (MTA) between Bangladesh and India, under SAARC. While such initiatives are welcome, it needs to be ensured that new barriers are not created for trade and cooperation in agriculture produce.

f. Cooperation between research institutions and knowledge sharing

There are several ways to raise the level of cooperation in rice seeds between the two countries. This, however, calls for a holistic approach encompassing several aspects, broadly including interests of local seed industry and farmers' interests. Some major areas of cooperation can include creating mechanism to joint seed development, cooperation in addressing issues such mutual recognition of seed production and certification procedures, mutual recognition and acceptance to quarantine and sanitary and phyto-sanitary (SPS) testing and certification, mutual agreement to release most suitable varieties available in each other, etc.

Several examples indicate potential for benefits from such cooperation. One such example is cooperation between research institutions between the two countries will reduce the gestation period for varietal development. In comparison to normal 10-20 years it takes to develop a variety, cooperation might help the two countries to develop varieties much quicker. . This

has already happened in the past with the help from International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

To bring in the change, a joint subject expert group might be set up to increase the knowledge-sharing activities. The group with support from other stakeholders can develop trade guidelines. Cooperation through exchange of scholars, cross-border participation and exchange of knowledge (mutual work of research institution and Agriculture Universities) needs to be addressed might also be promoted as a measure to promote trade and cooperation between the two countries.