

Renewable natural resource-use in livelihoods at the Calcutta peri-urban interface

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Overview: Despite much research concerning the management and problems of farming systems around Kolkata, especially in the East Kolkata Wetlands, few of the findings and recommendations have been acted upon. This has led to widespread skepticism concerning the potential benefit of further research. To date most research and survey work has focused on the management and finances of the peri-urban (PU) farming systems; the importance of these systems in the livelihoods of poor households and communities has not been considered in detail. Whilst it is recognised that these systems must be financially viable to be sustained, little consideration has been given to what impact the loss of these systems may have on the vulnerable and poor groups that depend on them either directly or indirectly for part or all of the livelihood.

Objectives: This study aims to focus specifically on the role of farming systems around Kolkata in the livelihoods of poor people to see how they benefit: directly from permanent employment e.g. fishermen or from temporary employment e.g. casual labourers; through employment in the supply and distribution networks e.g. seed traders and market vendors; through payment-in-kind for work undertaken on the farms e.g. weed clearing and carrying fish to market; from supplies of affordable fish and vegetables to markets serving the poor; from the managed reuse of waste, mitigating environmental degradation and reducing health risks; and from the overall improvement in environmental quality due to peri-urban farming.

Activities: Project activities are focused on both consolidating existing knowledge and generating new knowledge concerning the perceptions of stakeholders, including the poor.

- working with farmers: an initial survey of production systems was undertaken to assess the numbers and background of people whose livelihoods depend either directly or indirectly on farming systems at the Kolkata PU interface. Findings from this work are being used to help guide a more focused assessment of the benefits poor people derive from these systems.
- working with poor communities: representatives from selected poor groups, identified through poverty ranking, will be invited to participate in household interviews and focus groups to share perceptions of their livelihoods and discuss constraints and opportunities, with outcomes used to identify strategies to enhance poor livelihoods.
- working with senior stakeholders: to ensure that project findings and recommendations are implemented we are trying to work closely with senior stakeholders. Representatives from relevant government agencies, NGOs and CBOs have been interviewed to better understand their perceptions of PU farming, whilst project outputs will be disseminated in appropriate formats, targeted to meet the needs of the various stakeholders, increasing prospects for the development of peri-urban natural resource management strategies that benefit the poor.

Other project activities include an assessment of the supply and market networks in supporting poor livelihoods and the role of products from m PU farming systems in the food security of poor households and communities in Kolkata, consumers will be interviewed to assess their perceptions of the products they buy. In all activities particular emphasis will be given to the role of age and gender in regulating access and the influence of the peri-urban setting. The formulation of an effective communication and dissemination strategy for project outcomes, resulting in appropriate communication media and pathways for key stakeholders is also considered vital to project success.

Outputs: Outcomes from this research will be presented to local government departments with responsibility for managing and planning development in PU Kolkata. Findings will be disseminated to local NGOs, CBOs and other development-orientated agencies to help them target resources. Project partners and DFID will use knowledge generated concerning opportunities to enhance poor livelihoods through improved PU natural resource management, to formulate future research projects that address specific problems.

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