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INNOVISION CONSULTING
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[YEAR-END ASSESSMENT]

Alleviating Poverty in North-East Bangladesh (APONE)



Prepared for:



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Executive Summary

Background: APONE is a project which seeks to ensure sustainable livelihoods for poor and marginal communities, particularly women, in 6 Upazillas under 2 districts (Mymensingh and Sherpur) in North-East Bangladesh through improvements to small-scale agriculture. The project is managed by Traidcraft Exchange (TX) and co-implemented by Development Wheel (DEW) with 2 local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

The overall strategy of APONE can be summarized into a 3-pronged approach:

1. **Advocacy:** Increase access to vital knowledge, information, services, skills, equipment and inputs from private and public service providers
2. **Knowledge:** Ensure better agricultural management and build awareness of rights to fair market
3. **Stability:** Reducing farmers' vulnerability to environmental and financial shocks for a more stable business pattern

Group-approach is used by APONE to implement the project strategy. The project aims to create and develop the collective power of small and marginal farmers, increasing the recognition of their needs amongst Government and private sector stakeholders, improving better production practices and market access which should lead to a more stable business environment essential to their continual income increase and sustainable poverty reduction.

With one year passed from the 3-year long project, the project team now requires an assessment of their progress status against their LFA objectives in the form of an annual report. The aim is to provide an assessment of project progress and recommend any corrective or enhanced measures for 2013 to meet and/or build on the project objectives.

Methodology: The assessment used a combination of Desk Research and Field Assessment to evaluate both activities and results of the project in its first year of operation. 134 individuals were covered through FGDs and KIs in the field assessment. In addition, 180 beneficiaries' production performance was assessed through Producer Records collected by the project. In secondary research, various documents were provided by APONE, which recorded the activities of the project as well as its plan. The assessment was split against four main outputs targets.

In **Output 1**, that is Target farmers are working collectively and collaboratively, we assessed the performance to have met expectation. About 75% of the beneficiaries are working collectively with 38% already receiving some direct benefits or assistances as a group. Examples include getting better quality seeds at lower prices, starting group savings and working as labor on each other's fields for mutual savings on day laborers. 63% of beneficiaries are considered highly active and 25% – mostly Tribal Groups – require additional focus. These tribal groups of women have been separated from normal social functions which mean collective actions are much harder for them to adopt. In addition, although the project has demonstrated strong achievement till now, it might receive even greater benefits by also partially focusing on livestock management – which is a concern for all farmers we assessed.

In **Output 2**, that is the recognition of farmers' needs amongst public and private sector stakeholders, the project has achieved remarkable progress despite having no particular targets for the first year. In every FGD, the groups unanimously identified better relations with Agricultural Officers (Govt.) as the biggest benefit of working as a group under APONE. The progress has been due to diligent work by the Project Staff and the mutual benefit for the officers who find it easier to reach out to so many farmers in one place at one time due to the group-approach of APONE. Thus, APONE groups not only established linkages, but also acquired benefits in some cases like free poultry vaccination in Chikapara (Jhenaigati).

An unexpected benefit has been interest shown by other projects to work with the beneficiaries of APONE. The group of beneficiaries, with majority of women and some tribal groups are ideal beneficiary groups for other projects too. As such, the project has enjoyed added benefits at no financial cost by working together with these projects – thus enhancing APONE's VFM. An example has been free medicines given for livestock management to a tribal group in Jhenaigati. Linkage with private sector is yet to be established as activities are yet to be done. However, working as groups and assistance from Agriculture Officers has made some beneficiaries more educated about choosing the right fertilizers and seeds.

In **Output 3**, that is farmers improving agriculture practices and market access, the project has achieved extreme improvement. The source of the assessment was from Project Records provided by the project. Overall, 40.7% of the beneficiaries have 15% or more decrease in production cost, 50% of beneficiaries have 30% or more increase in productivity and 56.4% of beneficiaries have 30% or more increase in sales. It must be noted that our field assessment did not find any reason for these high levels of improvement. In addition, since no significant activity has been planned or done to influence the cost, productivity or sales, the results are probably due to some external factors and not attributable to the project.

In **Output 4**, that is target farmers are less vulnerable to shocks and stresses, especially natural disasters and climate fluctuations, we found the project to have moderately exceeded expectation. The project had minimal activity planned in promoting awareness of soil testing and using environment-friendly methods. There were demo plots made and field days held which generated awareness and interest in the methods. However, driven by the assistance of agricultural officers and diligent efforts of Project Staff, 14% of beneficiaries already performed soil test and 2% have started using compost fertilizer. In addition, beneficiaries themselves have started experimenting with new techniques like use of pheromone traps and natural birds in pest management. This indicates the willingness among beneficiaries to work with APONE.

Overall, in its first year, APONE has demonstrated satisfactory performance with exceeding expectations in many cases. It has generated head start on some of its 2nd year activities and going forward, better focus on its tribal groups and partial focus on livestock management for women-centric groups will take the project even further. The current management structure should be retained and developed as the project staff has shown strong commitment in reaching and exceeding the targets of the project.

Abbreviation

APONE	Alleviating Poverty in North East Bangladesh.
DEW	Development Wheel
GRAMAUS	Grameen Manobic Unnoyon Shangshata
RDS	Rural Development Shangshata
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
PMT	Project Management Team
LFA	Logical Framework Approach
BADC	Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation
DAE	Department of Agricultural Extension
VFM	Value for Money

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

APONE is a project which seeks to ensure sustainable livelihoods for poor and marginal communities, particularly women, in North-East Bangladesh through improvements to small-scale agriculture. The project is managed by Traidcraft Exchange (TX) and co-implemented by Development Wheel (DEW) with 2 local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Grameen Manobic Unnoyon Shangshata (GRAMAUS) and Rural Development Shangshata (RDS).

The project is based on the recognition that small and marginal farmers in the project area face a number of problems and challenges in their production system which means that productivity, quality and prices are low, while costs are high. Farmers lack the volumes and capacity to bargain for better prices, they face discrimination in accessing government services (especially women and ethnic minorities) and there is a frequent threat of crop-failure and loss of livestock, accentuated by climate change, leading to distress sales. Addressing these issues can only be done effectively by increasing access to vital knowledge, information, services, skills, equipment and inputs from private and public service providers. It is also crucial to engage with private companies and the government creating a win-win situation for all concerned. Ensuring better agricultural governance and improved access to rights and markets will increase farmers' incomes, produce more sustainable livelihoods and contribute towards poverty reduction targets. In order to achieve this aim several approaches has been taken simultaneously:

- **Creating and building the collective power of small and marginal farmers:**
Organizing small and marginal farmers into groups enable them to utilize their collective power to voice, negotiate and attain their rights and services from other stakeholders (public and private service providers, local authorities and other value-chain actors).
- **Recognition of farmers' needs amongst public and private sector stakeholders:**
The project raises awareness amongst public and private sector bodies and local authorities of the problems facing small and marginal farmers.
- **Improving farmers' production practices and market access:**
The project establishes Linkage between service providers and farmer groups to ensure farmers access appropriate and affordable agricultural services to help them improve cultivation practices, increase productivity, reduce costs and improve quality.
- **Reducing farmers' vulnerability to environmental and financial shocks and stresses:**
This is crucial to ensure the sustainability of people's livelihoods. The project assists farmers to adapt their cultivation practices so they are more resilient to shocks and stresses, especially natural disasters and climate fluctuations.

M&E System

Monitoring System

The project was implemented at the field-level by Development Wheel with the help of local CSOs GRAMAUS and RDS. The reporting structure is the CSOs reporting to DEW who in turns works as par Traidcraft Exchange's plan. The advantage of this system was the level of control and speed of execution for the project. Thus, 7171 beneficiaries were formed into 240 groups within months; which would be near impossible any other way. The CSOs perform the project activities under the guidance and supervision of DEW staff.

The DEW Staff receive the monthly action plan from TX office, according to which the project activities are executed. Due to lead time of less than a month, DEW staff has to coordinate with CSOs, who in turn coordinate with beneficiaries and other project stakeholders to deliver the action on time. This decentralization of execution combined with clear guidelines of roles and responsibilities communicated through a Project Handbook is one of the core strengths of the Project Management Team (PMT).

A PMT working paper is made every quarter which lays out the plan for the coming quarter and does interim monitoring of activities.

Evaluation System

The project being 36 month has interim assessments every 12 months with a mid-term and final review at 18 month and 36 month interval. This assessment is part of the yearly assessment to check the progression of the project. The progression is checked against pre-planned Logical Framework outlining the core-objectives of APONE and their consequent indicators and activities.

The assessment is done with a combined review of both secondary data and field-level surveys, KIs and FGDs.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Objective and Scope of Assessment

Objective

The overall objective of the assignment is to assess the status of the progress towards the achievements of outcomes/ output/activity till now, and write an Annual Project Report for the APONE project.

The specific objectives are to:

- Assess the progress towards the achievements of Year-01 output milestones
- Assess the progress towards the achievements of Year-01 activity milestones
- Capture individual and group achievement (case study)
- Draw key strategic and programmatic lessons (both positive and negative) that can be used to increase project efficiency in Year 02 and Year 03

Scope:

Since the project has completed the first year, the scope of the assessment is limited to planned activities and achievements only till March 31st. Thus, the scope of respondents is limited to project staff, beneficiaries and government staff.

2.2 Preparation

Given below is our process for conducting this assessment:

Process	Output
Review PMT Reports and other documents	Assess achievement of activity milestones
FGD with beneficiaries and other stakeholders	Assess achievement of output milestones
Interview with Project Staff	Assess effectiveness of project management

Documents Review

The following documents were shared along with their uses in this assessment:

Documents	Purpose in Assessment
The approved project proposal document	Project Overview
The approved logical frame work	Achievement Indicators
Other relevant resources–project approach, methodology, baseline report, etc	Project Details
List of target beneficiaries	Beneficiary Information/Field plan
Producer records	Impact of activities on Production
Training records/register	Implementation Activities
List of other project stakeholders	Field Planning
PMT reports	Activities overview
Case study	Evidence of achievement

Primary Study

A review of the documents revealed the activity-wise achievements of the project. It also gave a list of information still to be found. The information gap mostly consisted of the output-level achievements of APONE project activities. To do so, we first identified all the activities planned and completed by March 31st 2013, according to the approved logical framework and PMT reports. Next we designed a field-research plan to capture the output level achievements. The sampling plan is as below:

Respondent Type	Mymensingh	Sherpur	Total
Upazillas Covered	3	3	6
FGDs (15 in each)	4*15 = 60	4*15 = 60	120
Govt. Officials	1	1	2
DEW Field Staff	1	1	2
CSO Staff	1	1	2
Total Respondents			132

The sampling plan covered one group of beneficiaries from each of the 6 upazillas under the project with 2 additional FGDs with tribal/ethnic minority groups. Although groups had 30 members on average, only 15 were chosen for ease of arrangement and also because FGDs do not generally allow participation of more than 15 members for a fruitful discussion. DEW and CSO staff interviews were crucial to understanding whether the project is on-track in terms of relevance of activities to their final outcome, and challenges of implementation. From our initial desk research, and initial meetings with TX officials, it was revealed that linkages with government service providers were a major success of the project till now. Thus, to assess and validate that achievement, we also conducted KILs with government officials, namely the Agricultural Officers. The assessment also took account the **180 Producer records** provided by the Project Team.

2.4 Assessment against LFA Targets

The assessment was done against 4 main LFA Target outputs:

- Target farmers are working collectively and collaboratively
- Government and private sector stakeholders recognize the needs of target farmers and reflect these in the implementation of policies and practices and the allocation of resources
- Target farmers have improved their production practices (increased quality and yields, reduced costs etc.) and increased market access
- Target farmers are less vulnerable to shocks and stresses, especially natural disasters and climate fluctuations

Each of these targets has specific activity level and output level goals for March 31st 2013, against which the assessment was made.

Chapter 3: Assessment of APONE against LFA Targets

3.1 Farmers Working Collectively and Collaboratively

The core strategy of APONE is to work with beneficiaries in a group-approach. The beneficiaries were grouped into about 30 members each with a group leader and secretary. Working in a group approach allows faster implementation of activities and dissemination of information. Also, the target farmers being mostly poor marginalized farmers, group-based approaches have a stronger chance of building relations and negotiating with public and private service providers.

There are two aspects two this particular target output:

- Target Farmers are working Collectively, i.e., they are forming a group, working as a group and understand the benefits that would come from it
- Target Farmers are working collaboratively, i.e., they are turning their understanding into action, using their groups to perform certain actions for everyone's benefit

Groups working collectively – Group Cohesion

In terms of activity, APONE has reached their targeted goal of assembling 240 farmer groups with 7,131 members. They have done so in just a few months. One of the main reasons this activity was implemented so successfully was due to the usage of CSOs GRAMAUS and RDS. Their local knowledge and former work experience not only helped in identifying the correct beneficiaries; but also in choosing the right Group Leader and Secretary. In a group-based approach, competency and willingness of the group leader is often the main factor in developing and sustaining a group. In our assessment, 7 out of 8 leaders were found to be proficient in their role, with clear understanding and control over their group. This was due to APONE reaching their target of providing leadership and group management training in eighteen batches to nearly 500 group leaders and secretaries.

One way to judge the collective nature or unity of the group is the degree of participation in FGDs. Higher numbers of active participants indicate the understanding of group-based approach has reached the leader, and also disseminated among other members of the group.

Highly Active Groups

These are groups where 8-10 people were participating actively in the group. In our assessment **5 out of 8 groups (63% beneficiaries)** fell in this category. All the members of the group had an understanding of the likely benefits of working as a group and elaborated on it without prompting. Most common among those benefits were better relations with the Government Agricultural Officer, to be elaborated later in the next target.

Along with these, they also mentioned getting additional training from APONE Staff on various production practices. All 8 groups meet once every month diligently. The benefits of these meetings are mainly by sharing internally the knowledge on problems of their current crop or livestock and their probable solution. In addition, APONE personnel and other people like

Agricultural Officers also visit these meetings, giving them a platform to voice their concerns as a group.

These groups have a clear need for staying in the group, some of which are:

- Collective buying and selling
- Saving on transportation costs
- Better Bargaining power
- Group Savings for procurements of various things

These needs which depend on the groups continuing to work together indicate they have strong chance of sustaining for the duration of the project and after.

Medium Active Group

These groups are those where only the Group Leader and Secretary along with 1 or 2 others participated in the FGD. In our assessment **1 out of 8 groups (13% beneficiaries)** fell into this category. This group showed that although the Group leader and Secretary have a clear understanding, it may not have been disseminated fully throughout the group. However, this group, in Nokla, demonstrated strong leadership and control over group in terms of collaboration which indicates that the problem lies in the group leader/secretary's competency and not willingness to make the group work. The group still showed interest in working further and already started some collaborative actions.

Low Active Groups

These groups are those where Group Leader and Secretary do not have a clear understanding of the group-based approach and the general members show relatively low competency in working collectively. **2 out of 8 groups (25% of beneficiaries)** fell into this category – both of which are the tribal groups in Phulpur and Jhenaigati respectively. In Jhenaigati, the Group Leader was absent with the Secretary showing up at the end of the FGD. In Phulpur, the groups demonstrated vague understanding of the project's purpose and what to expect from group-based actions.

Investigating the situation further with local CSO and DEW staff, the additional challenges of being ethnic minority *and* a completely female group became obvious. These beneficiaries have been marginalized for a long time and generally have little or no experience in working collectively, even in a social context. Thus, it is much more difficult for them to adapt to this new method of work.

Another factor is these women are involved in agriculture only as additional labor in their spouse's field during sowing or harvesting season. Their spouses are in charge of all the agricultural decisions from choosing seeds, fertilizers, pesticides to cultivation practices and when to harvest. Thus, even if these women get the knowledge on better practices, it becomes difficult for them to put it to use as they need to convince their spouse first. While eventually, the project might lead to women having more decision-making power in family's agriculture, for now, the project's impact is relatively lower on them.

Having said that, tribal female groups are suitable target beneficiaries for many other projects and APONE has played an important role in connecting them to these projects for additional benefits for their improvement. These benefits will be further explained in Group Linkages section (Output Target 2).

Group working collaboratively – Group Action

With greater understanding comes the willingness to act. In highly or medium active groups, there has already been plenty of examples of groups working collaboratively. Some of these have been planned or shown by APONE, while others have come from the ingenuity of the group itself.



Better Seeds, better harvest now in Lakhaura (Sherpur)

Mr. Akhter reflected the group's concerns with overpriced adulterated vegetable seeds. During cucumber harvest this season, Mr. Akhter went to buy seeds at the local vendor and found it overpriced at BDT 120 per packet. However, he used the name of his group and warned to let all 30 members of his group know and avoid his shop. They reached an understanding for which only he and his group members now buy the seeds at the normal price of BDT 112.

Savings

Savings has been successfully initiated in **5 out of 8** groups. Among the rest, they have an understanding of the need for group savings. In most cases, the purpose of saving is the purchase of irrigation pump of some sort as shortage of water is one of the primary problems plaguing multiple upazillas under the project. The amount of saving ranges from BDT 50 to BDT 200. In Dhobaura, the group initiated a separate plan with their savings:



Savings to Business Case: Group Project in Dhobaura

When the savings scheme was introduced to this group in FGD, everyone participated with great enthusiasm, led by its leader. In just 2.5 months, they saved up enough to buy a calf. The calf was taken by one member, Mr. Abdul Hamid, who will rear it until it reaches adult size. Once the cow is sold, Mr. Abdul Hamid will receive the profit and his initial investment while the rest will go into group savings or to buy more calves. In this way, rather than just save money, the group has turned it into a growing business.

Collaborated Labor



Combined labor of Moddho Harikanda (Nokla):

When farmers of Moddho Harikanda thought of possible group-based activities, a very different idea struck them than the usual. This season, in mid-April, it will be harvesting time for the biggest crop of the year, Boro Rice. What they plan to try is work together as combined harvesting labor on each others' field. Current labor cost is BDT 300 (men) and BDT 125 (women) per day. This is what would be considered savings for each farmer.

Gaps and Recommendations

In terms of gaps, the tribal groups were found to be relatively behind others in terms of both group cohesion and collaboration. The reasons were as explained before. Apart from that, our assessment revealed livestock management to be a major concern for all groups and the biggest concern for some groups. DEW staff in Jhenaigati revealed that among 40 groups under that Upazilla, 17 groups had livestock as the bigger contributor to their overall income.

In addition, as mentioned before, women have little control over agriculture practice. They are given complete responsibility over livestock management. Each household has about 4-5 cows and calves and 8-15 chickens. Malnutrition and diseases are major problems for both, especially for chickens, which has roughly 70% mortality rate leading to loss of revenue and wasted cost in feeding and rearing. Although income currently is lower than in agriculture, there is greater potential in working with livestock management, especially among women groups.

Compared to APONE's focus on agricultural practices, livestock management has played a much minor role. Going forward, the project can have increased focus in improving livestock management for women-focused groups for greater impact.

One potential could be group buying of poultry vaccines. Each bottle is used for about 150 chickens, which is too expensive for one farmer to buy. However, as a group, it becomes highly affordable with the potential of tripling their output if mortality is reduced.

3.2 Linkage building with private and public service providers

One of the primary purposes of the APONE project is recognition of farmers' needs amongst public and private sector stakeholders. This means that these stakeholders who directly and indirectly influence the farmer's business would understand their needs. In turn, they would implement policies and business strategies that would take provide better services to the farmers to overcome their constraints while generating benefits for the private and public service providers.

In our assessment, we found APONE has made remarkable progress in this case, often exceeding expectation or plan. There are two aspects with this linkage building:

- Linkage built with public institutions like Government Agriculture office, build advocacy skills of groups so they can be aware of and avail government services and benefits like fertilizer subsidies.
- Linkage with private institutions like input sellers, build bargaining power of groups so they can use the combined buying capacity to influence wholesaler rates and ensure best quality of inputs.

Linkage with Public Institutions

In many ways, the relationship built with Public Service Providers, namely the agriculture officers, has been the single biggest achievement of APONE till now. Every group has named the better relations with government officials as the first and foremost benefit of working as a group under APONE. Without exception, every group mentioned never meeting the Agriculture Officer or Block Supervisor before APONE and now has a stronger relationship. For the officers, the main advantage is reaching out to groups instead of individuals. Every officer or supervisor has their own target of farmers to meet under their area. Since the number is huge, they have to narrow down their choice. As a result, the government officials focus on nearby farmers to maximize their numbers within the limited time – ignoring the poor farmers in remote areas.

Groups like those of APONE allow the officers to interact with a large number of farmers at once; making the time spent visiting them worth it. Thus, as soon as the groups were formed, government officials were eager to interact with them, bringing along the full support of government to them. The officials visit the groups in their monthly meetings to understand the groups' troubles and try to solve it with advice. They have also been helpful in providing government assistances to the farmers when needed. An example of such is given below:



Free Poultry Vaccine from Govt. for Chikapara (Jhenaigati):

With 70% mortality rate, poultry farming is difficult for farmers of Chikapara, Jhenaigati. Upon sharing their problems with the local Agriculture Officer, he administered free vaccine to some of their poultry – as per government assistance. While he was doing so, 3 members of the group also learned to do it. Now, they plan to buy vaccines as a group and administer it to the rest of their poultry as diseases are highly contagious and all poultry needs to be safe.

Linking with government officers has also helped with their livestock management. As seen before, this has been an essential help especially for women groups who are more interested in livestock management as they have control over it.

Linking with other projects

One unexpected benefit of APONE has been the interest shown by other projects to work on the project's beneficiaries. APONE has a high number of women and tribal beneficiaries. This makes the beneficiaries ideal for many other projects. The advantages are the same as government projects – group approach allows a large outreach in a relatively short time with limited resources. Thus we saw various projects reaching out to APONE Staff and groups with direct offers of assistance. The advantage is clear as it provides additional scope for poverty reduction to APONE beneficiaries with no extra financial requirements. A prime example can be seen with tribal group in Jhenaigati:



Free Deworming medicines for Jhenaigati Tribal's:
Among tribal female groups in Jhenaigati, livestock management is a major source of income as the sandy soil does not support farming much. Thus, World Vision reached out to these women along with the government Livestock department to give them free deworming tablets (from WV), vitamins and pregnancy medicine (from government). Ms. Nasreen Begum reveals the medicines will lead to healthier cows which can get additional

In Haluaghat, an all female group has been contacted by the Department for Agricultural Expansion (DAE) under their “Food Security Project”. Under the project, the beneficiaries were connected with a fashion house for which they sew sequins. Since they work as a group approach, it is easier for DAE to provide the raw materials and collect the finished products.

There are other examples of APONE staff either approaching other projects or vice versa for working with the beneficiaries. This may be considered a major success of the APONE project and its group-based approach. However, while measuring Project impact, one must separate the impact of APONE's own activities from that of other projects for proper evaluation.

Linkage with Private Sector

As per the LFA targets, although this is a major output of APONE, no linking activities has been planned till now other than the list of 204 public and private stakeholders carried over from previous project. Thus, no direct changes in the relationship can be seen. However, some spillover effect of other activities can be seen.

Government agriculture officers have shown some ways to detect substandard fertilizers which the farmers use to gain bargaining power with retailers. Using the collective power of groups, retailers choose to give the best possible inputs to the group members in case one bad sell will

equal 29 other lost sales. However, bulk buying/selling and any kind of market relation is yet to develop – which is natural since any linkage building activity on that level is yet to be done.



Tips learnt from Agriculture Officers about fertilizers:

How to detect adulterated Potassium: *Take a little bit of Potassium in hand and mix with water. Pure Potassium fertilizer will dissolve completely, leaving behind stone or cobbles used to add weight. Also, artificial color is often added, which when mixed with water, will rise to surface or stick to hand.* This tip was shared among multiple groups in our FGDs, using this, farmers like Mr. Munir Hossain has benefitted with better input and stronger bargaining power.

Gaps and Recommendations

In terms of linkage building we found no discernible gaps with the planned outcome of APONE. Rather we found the pace at which the relation developed to be faster than expectation. What was even more impressive was the degree of interest shown by other projects both public and private. From renowned organizations like World Vision to the Department of Agricultural Expansion, the beneficiaries seem ideal for multiple purposes.

APONE can use this advantage to work with other projects to generate additional benefit for the beneficiaries which will increase the VFM of the project. However, one must also exercise caution when choosing to work with certain projects. One must ensure the project and its approach keeps in line with that of APONE.

Going forward, linkages with private stakeholders both input sellers and wholesalers need to be developed for increasing bargaining power in the market.

3.3 Target Farmers have improved production practices

One of the major targets of APONE was to help farmers to bring 15% decrease in production costs. That means shrinking different cost component to reduce overall total production costs through project activities (knowledge and information sharing). However, it has been seen from the producer record that 55% targeted paddy farmers saw a 15% decrease in overall production cost. This was due to lesser seed, pesticides and fertilizer cost. Conversely we did not see any activities done with the beneficiaries to reduce costs for paddy so far. On the other hand 26% vegetables farmers got reduced production cost but overall production cost increased by 12%. This is because the costs of chemical fertilizer, tillage and irrigation got reduced but costs of compost, lease and labor increased significantly. This could be because of some external factors as the project did not work to deal with the costs yet. However we have not seen any impact of project activities in production practices of farmers in FGDs, so we cannot say that the costs shrank because of the project.

According to APONE LFA, another important indicator was to see a 30% increase in farmer's productivity by training them about better culture process. From the survey we see that about 17% paddy farmers and 42% vegetables farmers produced more than that of baseline year. Reportedly, the production of those farmers increased because of better seed (provided by BADC), field days and demonstrations penetrated by APONE.

Another indicator of APONE project was to boost up sales by 30%. By the end of the first year 21% paddy farmers experienced increased sales due to 14% increase in average sales price. The price of rice (Aman & Boro) went from BDT 14/Kg to 16/KG on an average. Though project has the mandate to work for better market access but it has not started yet. So clearly, price increment is not an impact of APONE.

All the culture practice related indicators achieved their target, which is good for the beneficiaries. As no or little related activities were observed to improve culture practices, we can not confidently say that, everything happened because of APONE. As far as the FGDs are concerned, no farmers reported to have any impact on cost, productivity and sales because of APONE as of now. However they are hopeful to receive training and knowledge to improve their culture practice through APONE in near future.

3.4 Resilience to market and environmental shocks

The areas chosen for APONE have been taken due to their remote nature. Among the many challenges, lies geographical remoteness and environmental shocks like floods or draught etc. The combination of geographical and environmental challenges leads to frequent distress selling of their produce, which binds them to a life of poverty.

In this light, as the external challenges mentioned above cannot be countered, the objective of APONE is to make the farmers more resilient to these shocks. The primary strategy is for the target farmers to have a better understanding of their environment and their market so they can take advantage or do better damage control during market or environmental shocks.

In this target, there was no specific aim set for March 31st 2013. However, our assessment reveals significant progress has been made in this field. Two main activities implemented related to this target were:

1. Soil Fertility Test performed by target farmers with assistance of service providers
2. Crop diversification adopted by target farmers to counter market shocks

In both cases, we saw noticeable progress being made as a side-effect of achieving better linkage with public service providers and groups working collectively.

Soil Fertility Test

Soil Fertility test is an agriculture activity with far reaching impact on general agricultural output. It defines the fertilizer and micronutrient needs of the soil depending on the soil to be cultivated. Doing so not only saves cost by preventing wastage of excess fertilizer; but also protects the soil from chemical imbalances caused by excess use of one kind of fertilizer – thus giving better yield to whatever is being harvested.

Despite the numerous benefits of a soil test, it is not done by most farmers anywhere. This is due to the fact that there is only one soil fertility test center in each division, with the one here being in Mymensingh. Thus, most farmers remain ignorant of it or unable to do it as it is too much of a hassle and expense considering travel time and cost.

Under APONE, the project staff has already managed to facilitate soil testing of 967 target farmers (~14% of total beneficiaries) through 33 service providers. In our assessment we found a minimum of 4-5 members in each group has done their soil test. Many others are interested but could not as their crop was already in the ground. The number is expected to rise once the crops are harvested. Soil testing has also led to greater awareness and use of compost fertilizer. By project count, they have found 143 compost users (~2% of total beneficiaries) although our FGDs did not find any. However, the awareness building activities have yet to be done in many areas as per Year 02 plans. There have been positive exceptions as seen in Chikapara (Jhenaigati):



100% Soil Testing in Chikapara (Jhenaigati):

Md. Atahar Ali is the senior-most member and a strong group leader. Along with his Secretary, he convinced *all* members of his group to go for soil testing. The soil was collected with the help of APONE Staff and Agriculture Officer. They have even received the report but cannot interpret it. The Agriculture Officer has promised to join them on their next meeting to explain each report to each individual, demonstrating the strong relation the group has with him.

Crop Diversification and Demo Plots

Crop diversification is one strategy chosen by APONE to increase farmers' resilience. Few groups have been taught the advantage of it. Groups have yet to adopt it as no thorough activity has been done by APONE in Year 01. There are various other environment-friendly methods to cultivation which will be taught through this project. One strategy has been to have 20 demo plots and corresponding field days across the project areas to build confidence in the project's way of agriculture among beneficiaries and other farmers.

Our assessment covered one such demo plot by Md. Atahar Ali of Chikapara, Jhenaigati:



Demo Plot of Md. Atahar Ali, Chikapara (Jhenaigati):

Out of 1 acre, he provided 6 decimal land for demo plot. All inputs were provided by APONE. In addition, pipes were laid for IWM (Integrated Water Management). During the field day, all group members and surrounding farmers came to see his plot. Most farmers showed interest and would be convinced once the final harvest is collected in Mid-April or May.

While the demo plot has succeeded in generating interest and awareness, its output remains to be seen along with demo plot owners scaling up the methods to cover rest of their land on their own cost.

What is encouraging is that few farmers have started experimenting with other environment friendly methods partially on their own land. This indicates APONE beneficiaries are more open to new ideas and likely to generate a higher rate of adoption.



Different approaches to Crop-Pest Management:

Mr. Harez Ali (2nd from right) introduced pheromone traps into his field. He learned about it and got assistance from Agriculture Officer to implement it over a portion of his land. He claims it reduces pesticide use by half, but will have to yet till final harvest to see if it is actually effective. Another member from a different group has started trial of natural birds to control pest.

Gaps and Recommendation

In our assessment of this output, we found no lacking in APONE's achievement with its plan. Rather the start of soil testing and savings shows the project is getting a head start on its targets for 2014. Environment-friendly cultivation practices are various and it is unlikely all will be adopted at once. However, the success might greatly depend on the outputs from the demo plots and in case of success, if it is disseminated among all groups properly.

With the increase in Soil testing, balanced fertilization is the logical next step. The combined effect is likely to reduce cost further and increase yield and thus revenue in 2013. Continued relations with public service providers along with new private sector stakeholders is essential to reduce market shocks and distress selling along with making diversification of crops more lucrative. Overall, the concern for APONE groups is ensuring consistent affordable water supply for irrigation when considering environmental factors. As for market factors, stability of prices remain a big concern for beneficiaries to be addressed in Year 02.

Chapter 5: LFA Summary

5.1 LFA Summary

Output	Indicators	Target - 2013	Achieved
Effectiveness of Group Formation	% taking Collective action	20%	75%
	% negotiating with local SH for improved Resources and services	20%	38%
	% benefitting from membership	40%	75%
Advocacy and lobbying with Govt. and Pvt. Stakeholders	Number of improvements in policies, practices or resources negotiated by the district or regional associations	0	0
	Number of public & private service providers providing more appropriate & affordable services to target farmers	204	204
	% benefitting from membership	0	
Improved Production practices	% with 15% decrease in production costs	10%	41%
	% with 30% increase in productivity	10%	50%
	% with 30% increase in sales	10%	56.4%
Less vulnerable to shocks and stresses	% satisfied with services received	10%	75%
	% with Diversified Production and/or more eco-friendly cultivation practice	0%	0%
	% with increased soil fertility	0%	0%

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

APONE, in its initial year has shown impressive progress against its original plan. The project has been managed with proficient and timely measures. Our assessment grades it “A+” overall meaning highly satisfactory with exceeding expectations in some cases.

It is obvious that some of the gaps will be there if we are to implement such a big project like APONE. It is recommended that tribal groups should be handled with more care than local groups as they were found weaker. Also, as women have little control over agriculture, they should be made engaged in livestock management. Even the project can have increased focus in improving livestock management for women-focused groups for greater impact

In terms of linkage building with public and private stakeholders, the project was effective and efficient. Unlike before the groups are now much more confident and comfortable to contact public service providers. However linkage with private service provider can be made stronger to increase bargaining power in the market.

Some activities like soil testing, savings, de-worming etc has already been started that indicates sbetter chance of achieving goals of 2014.

Though the farmers are hopeful about project support, it is very essential to make every group members understand what to expect from the project or the scope of the project clearly.

Good communication between project management team and group members is very crucial for the success of the project. Only collaboration and co-operation can take the project to its expected success

- How do they face the problems?
- How do they negotiate with local stakeholders for improved resources and services?
- What other benefits they target to achieve by collective movement?
- Do they feel their situation has improved since they are talking collection action?

Module 4: Information on existing groups / associations

- How many existing groups or associations are there in the area?
- How many are members of them?
- What benefits / services they perceive from them?
- Are the benefits / services satisfactory?
- What other benefits / services they seek from them?

Module 5: Status of services received

- What are the sources of input? (seeds, fertilizer, insecticides, fingerlings, cattle)
- Are they satisfied with the price and quality?
- Are the inputs available whenever needed?
- What major problems they face in acquiring them?
- What steps do they take to tackle these problems?
- Who are their main input sources? Private companies or Govt.? Why
- What services they get for their income generating activities?
- Who do they approach to for ask / buy services mostly?

Module 6: Market details

- What is the usual selling behavior of the farmers? (Group, single or both)
- Which one they find more profitable? Why?
- How many intermediaries are there for their product to reach from them to market?
- Are they satisfied with the price they get? If not, what actions they take for better price?
- Are they aware of the price fluctuations in the market? How much the seasonal variation affects them

Module 7: Awareness on Govt. policies

- Are they aware about the different Govt. policies for the farmers?
- How they are / can be benefitted from these policies?
- Do you think the policies are being implemented properly? If why, what are the barriers in the implementation process?
- How do you think this situation can be improved?

Module 8: Disaster risks and mitigation measures

- How often do you face natural disasters in the area? How do they impact you?
- What measures do you take to mitigate the loss?
- Did you try crop changing before? Do you know if any other farmers in your locality has changed crop before?