

Forced out: Crop loan blight marginalizes rice growers

Case Study on Government Credit Production Assistance to Small Boro Paddy Farmers in Bangladesh

Introduction

Context

As the oldest and most widely practiced occupation in human society, agriculture has been the backbone of economic development since the dawn of civilization. The development of the agriculture sector is of paramount importance, not merely because it provides food, fodder, and other agro-products to a growing population, but also because it ensures a strong raw material base for industry as well as the service sector – two other major sectors of the economy apart from agriculture. This is true also in Bangladesh, a country in South Asia which is still a rural nation with a large rural population that is – directly or indirectly – heavily dependent on agriculture (Sarker, 2006).

Overview of agriculture sector

Agriculture has played a remarkable role in the economic development of Bangladesh in terms of production, employment, and export generation, among others (Suhrawardy, 2013). Agriculture is the basic sector of the country in providing employment (about 40 percent) and GDP contribution (about 13 percent) (BBS, 2018; BBS, 2019). The commercialization of agriculture has contributed significantly to the trade-commerce-industry of the country, though it has many adverse effects on the living and livelihood of farmers, especially the poor and marginalized peasant communities (Barkat, et. al., 2017).

Agriculture support systems or extension works play an important role in the development of agriculture in the country (Siddiqui, 1998). The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) is the largest extension service provider in Bangladesh. The mission of the DAE is to provide efficient, effective, decentralized, location-specific, demand-responsive, and integrated extension services to all categories of farmers in accessing and utilizing better know-how to increase sustainable and profitable crop production (DAE, 2016). Hence, the support system, at least in black and white, is decentralized – up to the union level (lowest local government institution); though in practice, it suffers from various limitations (Afrad, Wadud and Babu, 2019).

Access to land or securing tenure rights to land is important for land-dependent vulnerable communities in Bangladesh to overcome poverty (Suhrawardy, et al.,



2020). However, agriculture in Bangladesh abounds with smallholder farmers, most of whom are family farmers (Barkat, et al., 2021). The country has an official definition of smallholder farmers or farm households: *Farm households having land up to 150 decimals¹ are considered smallholder farm households.*

There is no “direct and comprehensive” land or agriculture reform policy in the country until now. The country has a two-decade-old land use policy called the National Land Use Policy 2001 (Barkat, et al., 2021). Its comprehensiveness is questioned as some new land aspects have emerged² in the last two decades and some old aspects³ have gotten new dimensions during the period. Land for agriculture or food security remains unprotected with rising commercial and non-agricultural use of land (Barkat, et al., 2015). To protect agricultural land and the good use of land, the “Land Reform Law 2014” has been drafted and placed on the Land Ministry website for opinions (MoL, 2016).

Some other policies that have an impact on land or agrarian reform include the National Agriculture Policy 2018, the Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Policy 1997, the Non-agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Policy 1995, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950, the National Food Policy 2006, the National Jute Policy 2011, the Bio-Safety Rules 2012, the Bangladesh Water Act 2013, the Safe Food Act 2013, the National Nutrition Policy 2015, the Fertilizer Management Act 2006 (Amended in 2018), the Integrated Small Cultivation Act 2017, the Ground Water Management Act 2018, among others.

Organic farming is getting popular in Bangladesh, albeit slowly. The country has a policy on sustainable farming called the “Organic Farming Policy 2018.” Few public and private projects and programs are there to foster the implementation of the 2018 policy.

Government projects and programs directed towards the benefit of smallholder farmers are usually carried out under the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). In Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 to 2021, MoA has implemented ten projects (of BDT 471.51 crore or USD 55.07 million) that have a direct impact on smallholder family farmers (Barkat, et al., 2021).

Climate change has exerted adverse effects on agriculture in Bangladesh. Salinity, drought, untimely heavy showers, and recurrent floods are some of major manifestations of climate change which affect the agriculture sector of the country (Barkat, et al., 2015).

¹One decimal is about 40.5 square meters.

²For example, elevation of a large plot of land in the southern region of the country

³Salinity, soil erosion, etc.

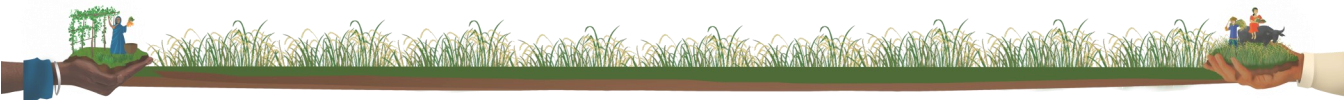


Table 1. Potential impacts of climate change on agricultural food systems

Impact source	Impact on food system assets	Impact on food system activities
A. CO ₂ fertilization effects	Production assets	Producing Food
B. Increase in global mean temperatures		
C1. Gradual changes in precipitation (increase in the frequency, duration, and intensity of dry spells and droughts)		
C2. Gradual changes in precipitation (changes in timing, location, and amounts of rainfall)		
D. Increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events (increase in annual occurrence of high winds, heavy rains, storm surges, flash floods, and rising water levels associated with tornadoes, tropical storms, and prolonged heavy rains)		
E. Greater weather variability		

Source: FAO and IDWG (2008) in Barkat, Suhrawardy & Osman (2015)

A situationer on smallholder farmers and their sources of credit

Over 45 percent of total households (about 35.5 million) in Bangladesh are farming households (about 16.6 million households operate at least five decimals of cultivated area) (BBS, 2019). Most of these households are marginal and smallholder farmers. A 2016 CGAP (Consultative Group to Assist the Poor) working paper on a national survey on smallholder households in Bangladesh finds that there is heavy dependence on agricultural income among smallholder households; they are vulnerable to weather-related events that threaten their agricultural activities, and typically they have few, if any, resources at their disposal when these events occur (Anderson, et al., 2016). A majority of smallholder farmers are not financially included; most of the older smallholders are committed to farming and need information and tools to plan their agricultural and financial lives.

According to the same survey (Anderson, et al., 2016), the types of ownership and/or possession of land by the smallholders are varied. Over 50 percent of the smallholder farmers possess a lease or certificate, with around one-tenth of them either possessing their land according to customary law (12 percent) or having communal land (11 percent). They own or possess a small amount of land. Around 90 percent of them own or rent less than one hectare of land and nearly a one-tenth own between one and two hectares.

More than half of Bangladeshi smallholders go for multi-cropping for both consumption and selling. About one-fourth of them practice either triple-cropping (12 percent) or quadruple-cropping (12 percent). Paddy is the most important crop to smallholders. Other crops include jute, potato, onion, garlic, pulse, etc.



Table 2. Cropping season of some major crops cultivated by the smallholder farm households

Crop	Cropping Season	
	Starting	Harvesting
Boro (HYV/High breed)	Mid-October	End of June
Boro (Local)	Beginning of October	End of June
Potato (HYV)	Beginning of September	End of March
Jute	Mid-February	Mid-September
Onion	Beginning of November	End of May
Garlic	Beginning of November	End of May
Pulse (Mosur)	Beginning of October	Mid-March

Source: BB (2020)

Most of the smallholder farmers in rural Bangladesh need credit but do not have comfortable access to formal loan sources (Khondker, et al., 2013). Major sources of credit for smallholder farmers include NGOs, microfinance institutions (MFIs), cooperatives/*samity*, and various non-institutional or personal avenues like *mahajans*, friends or relatives, and *dadan* businessmen.

They also get some loans from different government institutions like the Rural Development Board, Department of Youth Development, Department of Women Affairs, Department of Social Services, etc. They hardly get loans from private and public commercial or specialized banks.

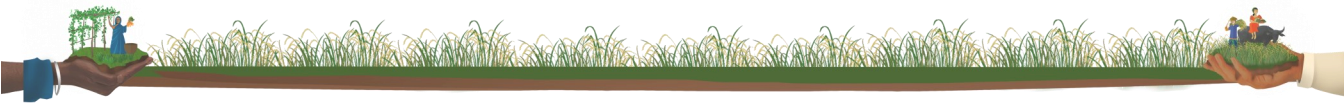
The research study

- **Statement of the problem**

Agricultural credit support to smallholder farmers in Bangladesh is inadequate. Access to credit of smallholder farmers is constrained by various institutional and non-institutional factors. The credit program under the study does not seem to contribute to the holistic development of smallholders to a larger extent. It addresses needs of smallholder farmers to a limited extent. The program is not that much proactive in targeting women smallholders and farmers practicing organic and sustainable farming. The policies and procedures of the credit program do not seem to be aligned with the capacities of smallholder farmers to the fuller extent. The policies and procedures are not flexible and considerate enough, given the situation of smallholder farmers.

- **Objectives of the study**

This country case study on public agricultural production credit assistance in Bangladesh has been conducted in pursuit of two specific objectives:



- a. Analyze the relevance, appropriateness, accessibility, and usefulness of an existing government production credit assistance (Crop Loan of Bangladesh Krishi Bank in this regard) for Boro paddy smallholder farmers; and,
- b. Propose recommendations to government lending institutions to improve smallholders' access to and utilization of the credit program.

● Methodology

The study has attempted to explore the amount of credit (with conditions) used by the smallholder Boro farmers, the farmers' credit needs, unmet credit demand, access barriers, favorable credit terms and conditions in two districts (first one in the northern and second one in the central region of the country).⁴ For this reason, two focus group discussions (FGDs) have been conducted. To supplement the findings of the FGDs, a few key informant interviews (KIIs) with the credit officials of Bangladesh Krishi Bank (BKB) have also been conducted.

The study has selected a credit program termed as the "Crop Loan" under BKB, a specialized government bank, and started inquiry into the following: the objective/s of the program, the coverage of program, its clientele (target and actual), the types and amounts of loans and other financial assistance, support services, repayment rates, sanctions for non-repayment of loans, credit channels, program management and staffing, strengths and challenges.

Extensive literature review, web navigation, and newspaper scanning were conducted apart from the FGDs and KIIs. However, the small number of FGDs and KIIs is one of the limitations of the study.

● Overview of selected farmers and crop

Around one crore or 10 million agriculture households are engaged in Boro paddy production (9.29 million in 2019); about ten percent of those households are headed by females. Most of these farmer households own less than half a hectare of land (Ahmed and Bakhtiar, 2020). They are heavily dependent on the land rental market for operating their holdings. The average number of household members in the family is about five. They use green revolution (GR) technology, such as high-yielding variety (HYV) seed, chemical fertilizer, pesticide, mechanized irrigation, and harvesting equipment. Some of them use organic farming technology. Most of the Boro farmers produce around one maund (around 37 kilograms) of paddy per decimal of land.

Paddy is the main food grain of Bangladesh. The country is the fourth largest paddy producer in the world. The average production of paddy per hectare in Bangladesh is 4.2 tons (Julkarnain, n.d.). Based on weather and climate, three seasons of paddy production can be observed in the country, namely: Aaush, Aman, and Boro. Boro paddy or spring-paddy (*bashontic*) is a winter (*rob*) crop. Boro season begins as soon as Aman season ends. Planting of the paddy starts from the Bengali month of

⁴Three districts were selected primarily for FGDs. Later, the Southern district (Patuakhali) was dropped due to the deteriorating situation with the COVID-19 pandemic.



Kartik (October to November) and continues until the month of *Boishakh-Joistha* (April to June). It lasts from early autumn to mid-summer. Rainfall is generally low when Boro is grown, so this type of paddy is largely dependent on irrigation. Twenty-seven varieties of Boro paddy have been developed in the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) so far.

The BRRI-28 and BRRI-29 varieties cover about one-fourth of the total production of staple food grains in the country that are planted during Boro season (Julkarnain, n.d.). The biggest breakthrough in terms of innovation came after the release of these two varieties in 1994. In areas where there is a demand for advanced varieties during the Boro season or when transplanted, Aaush or jute is cultivated after the Boro, the BRRI-28 variety is especially suitable. In areas where transplanted, Aman is cultivated after the Boro crop or only Boro is cultivated as a single crop, BRRI-29 is suitable. Production of BRRI-28 yields 5.5 to six tons per hectare. Production of BRRI-29 yields six to eight tons per hectare. Now, the Boro season provides half of the country's total paddy. In the FY 2018 to 2019, the country produced about 36.4 million tons of rice, where Boro paddy contributed about 54 percent of the total.

At present, about 60 percent of the paddy cultivated in the Boro season is of either the BRRI-28 or BRRI-29 variety. Prior to this, rain-fed Aman paddy was predominant in the total paddy production of the country. But after the invention of these two, with the increase in irrigation facilities, there was a big change in the Boro cultivation (Julkarnain, n.d.).

Dependence on Boro season has increased. BRRI-28 and BRRI-29 have been converted into two mega varieties as the alternative varieties have not been available for a long time. The need for a balanced fertilizer for the good production of Boro paddy is undeniable. Irrigation is one of the major sources of expenditures in Boro cultivation. The continuation of rice production in the last few decades has brought relief to the country's food security, which is largely due to the contribution of Boro paddy (Roy, 2021).

Role of credit in agricultural development of smallholder farmers

Introduction

The word credit is derived from the Latin word "*creditum*" which means "that which has been entrusted" by one person or institution to another person or institution for a particular period of time for use with the belief that it will be returned (Islam, 1982). The money that is borrowed by farmers to meet their production requirements as well as their consumption needs is termed as agricultural credit (Sarker, 2006). Agricultural credit is among the most indispensable production inputs in agricultural development. In this regard, Sir Frederick Nicholson had noted in his report on "Land and Agricultural Banks" (1895) that, "the lesson of universal history from Rome to Scotland is that an essential component of agriculture is credit. Neither the condition of the country nor the position of agriculture affects the one great fact that agriculturists must borrow" (Akhunji, 1982).



For the purpose of this paper, agrifinance, in its narrow sense, indicates financing for cropping (storage, transport, marketing are not usually included). In a broader sense, agrifinance includes finance for horticulture, poultry and livestock rearing, fisheries, among others.

Role of credit in agricultural development of Bangladesh

Agricultural credit is an integral part of the modernization of agriculture, production, and marketing of agricultural commodities and the improvement of farmers' living and livelihoods (Sarker, 2006). In comparison to any other sector, agriculture depends more on credit primarily because of seasonal variations in farmers' returns. Access to credit or participation in credit programs has a positive impact on agricultural production through financing input purchases, wages, and sales processes.

Availing credit has a significant positive effect on total household crop production, in comparison to an otherwise similar household that does not receive credit (Khondker, et al., 2013). Access to credit has given an opportunity to small and marginal farmers to plough their small plot of land and has also made the lease of additional land possible and in this way enables them to augment household production and income.

As there is no unmixed blessing in the world, credit becomes a bane instead of a boon for smallholder farmers in some cases. When smallholder farmers suffer from crop loss or less-cropping, they run the risk of defaulting on loans. Exorbitant interest rates and unfavorable repayment conditions for credit, among others, cause harm to smallholder farmers. Having debt burdens and falling into debt traps are some ill consequences of a credit culture.

In rural Bangladesh many formal, semi-formal, and informal institutions and agencies are involved directly or indirectly in the provision of agricultural credit (Khondker, et al., 2013). Bank and non-bank financial institutions (especially NGOs and cooperatives) play a leading role in financing agricultural loans. Banks currently involved in disbursement of agricultural credit are as follows: Bangladesh Bank (BB); nationalized commercial banks (NCBs), i.e., Sonali Bank Ltd, Janata Bank Ltd, Agrani Bank Ltd, etc.; national specialized banks (NSBs), i.e., Bangladesh Krishi Bank (BKB) and Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank (RAKUB); and, local and foreign private commercial banks (PCBs).

A total of 55 banks – two NSBs, six NCBs, nine foreign PCBs, and 38 local PCBs – are engaged in agricultural credit disbursement (for crop and horticulture, fisheries, livestock and poultry) in FY 2020 to 2021 (BB, 2020).

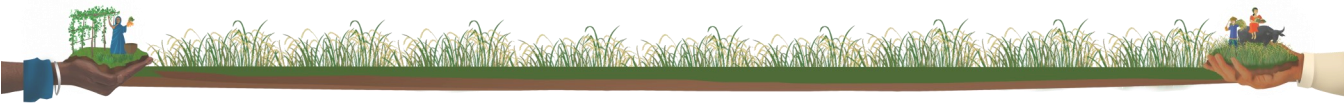
Policy environment on government agricultural credit

BB, the Central Bank of Bangladesh, formulates on behalf of government agricultural credit policies at the national level and provides institutional support for

the implementation of those policies. On an annual basis, the Agricultural Loan Department of BB issues detailed policy guidelines termed as the “Agricultural and Rural Credit Policy and Programme” for the proper disbursement, utilization, and recovery of agricultural credit through NCBs, NSBs, and PCBs (BB, 2020). Besides this aggregate policy, sector-specific policies are there which emphasize agricultural production credit assistance for this particular sector, for example, the National Agriculture Policy 2018 for smallholder farmers; the Organic Farming Policy 2018 for organic and sustainable farming; the National Women Development Policy 2011 for women; and, the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan 2008 for climate change (Box 1).

Box 1. Sector-specific policies on agricultural production credit assistance

<p>National Women Development Policy 2011 (Source: https://mowca.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mowca.portal.gov.bd/policies/64238d39_0ecd_4a56_b00c_b834cc54f88d/National-Women-Policy-2011English.pdf)</p>	
<p>Section 25. Section 25.2.</p>	<p><i>Economic Empowerment of Women</i> To give women the rights to wealth and resources earned through income, succession, loan/credit, land, and market management</p>
<p>Section 26. Section 26.4.</p>	<p><i>Employment of Women</i> To undertake programs for imparting special training and credit facilities for women entrepreneurs</p>
<p>Section 31. Section 31.4.</p>	<p><i>Women and Farming</i> To take steps to ensure the farming women have equal opportunity in having agricultural inputs like fertilizer, seed, farmer's card, and credit facilities, etc.</p>
<p>National Agriculture Policy 2018 (Source: https://bangladeshbiosafety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/National-Agriculture-Policy_2018_English.pdf)</p>	
<p>Section 5.6 Section 5.6.1 Section 5.6.2</p>	<p>Small scale irrigation ownership and agricultural credit Encourage joint ownership of irrigation equipment Take measures to provide crop and seasonal credit to increase interest in farming of small and medium farmers</p>
<p>Section 5.6.3</p>	<p>Take measures to waive interest for farmers affected by disasters and arrange for providing them new credit or production support</p>
<p>Section 15.3 Section 15.3.1</p>	<p>Incentives, Agricultural Rehabilitation, and Market Development Increase the productivity of crops, improve post-harvest technology, sustainable natural resource management, and provide financial assistance or loan for the development for the above activities</p>
<p>Section 15.3.2</p>	<p>Undertake special efforts to provide loans, production support, and agricultural rehabilitation to the poor and marginal farmers</p>
<p>National Organic Farming Policy 2016 (Sources: https://moa.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/moa.portal.gov.bd/policies/3c9ad962_d98e_40be_9a87_65b31ff0f065/act_2016_19-04-2017.pdf https://moa.gov.bd/site/view/policies/%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%80%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE-)</p>	
<p>Section 3.11.1</p>	<p>The benefits applicable to the farmers in the “Agricultural Marketing” sub-sector in the National Agricultural Policy will also be considered applicable to the organic farmers</p>
<p>Section 3.11.2</p>	<p>Necessary steps will be taken to provide loans on easy terms/ conditions from financial institutions for organic fertilizers, production of organic pesticides, and organic agriculture</p>
<p>Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan 2009 (Source: https://www.iucn.org/downloads/bangladesh_climate_change_strategy_and_action_plan_2009.pdf)</p>	
<p>Climate change action plan (54-58 point) P. 31</p>	<p>Financing the climate change action plan</p>



In the Agricultural and Rural Credit Policy and Programme for FY 2020 to 2021, a special policy (6.19.6) on credit assistance for smallholder farmers states that priority should be given to landless farmers (having land less than 0.494 acre or 0.2 hectare), small and marginal farmers (having land of between 0.494 acre to 2.47 acres (0.2 hectare to one hectare), and sharecroppers (those who cultivate others' land and have a maximum of one acre or 0.4 hectare of land). With finance from JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), BB has been implementing the “Small and Marginal Sized Farmers Agricultural Productivity Improvement and Diversification Financing Project” (SMAP). Government has some other programs like “Amar Bari Amar Khamar” (My House My Farm), “Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation” (PKSF), and “Social Development Foundation” (SDF) on credit assistance for smallholder farmers.



As a component of organic and sustainable farming, government has a special policy in the ongoing Agricultural and Rural Credit Policy. The policy (6.07) states that banks and financing institutions will support organic fertilizer initiatives like vermicomposting. For encouraging commercial production of vermicompost, the Sustainable Finance Department of BB refinances original bank financing.

A special policy (6.19.16) in the Agricultural and Rural Credit Policy and Programme for FY 2020 to 2021 states that women can be encouraged in cropping, small scale processing, small agro-trades, gardening, nursery, post-harvest activities, seed production and preservation, and poultry and livestock rearing through loan financing.

Government has taken into account the effects of climate change in the formulation of its credit program. A special policy (14.0) in the last Agricultural & Rural Credit Policy encourages climate financing issues in formal agricultural credit programs.

Government credit program for smallholder farmers

Introduction

Access to credit from BKB has exerted many positive impacts on the production, employment, income, and food security, among others, of rural households since its inception (Uddin, 2010). But the positive outcome has not been even and equal across households. Smallholder farm households cannot reap the maximum benefits of BKB credit as there are ills and irregularities in the process of loan sanctioning (Box 2).



Box 2. Fraud and bribery towards farmers in the process of accessing BKB loan

Azhar Sikder recently took a loan of BDT 220,000 (USD 2,588) from BKB's branch in DM Khali union of Vedharganj *upazila* in Shariatpur district for banana cultivation by showing fake documents (banana cultivation did not exist in reality). Akhter Hossain, a farmer from the same area, alleged that he paid a bribe of BDT 12,000 (USD 141) to take a loan of BDT 150,000 (USD 1,765). It has also been alleged that another recipient named Shahidul Sardar paid a bribe of BDT 10,000 (USD 117) to the bank staff to take a loan of BDT 50,000 (USD 585). Dadan Miah, a farmer from DM Khali village, complained that it takes a bribe of BDT 10,000 to 12,000 (USD 117 to 141) to take a loan of BDT 100,000 (USD 1,170).

Poor farmers are being harassed by intermediaries and bank officials step by step in the loan sanction process. There are allegations that ward Awami League (the incumbent political party) President Farooq Sarkar lobbied the farmers of Taltola village in DM Khali union to get loans. For this, he has his own office in the village market. To the locals it is known as the office of Krishi Bank. Farooq Sarkar claimed that the people of the village do not understand the documents, so he acts to correct loan-related documents. Mohammad Hossain, the manager of DM Khali Union Krishi bank branch, has denied allegations of irregularities, saying there were many intermediaries here a few years ago. Now, no such person is allowed to enter their bank.

Source: Rahman (2021)

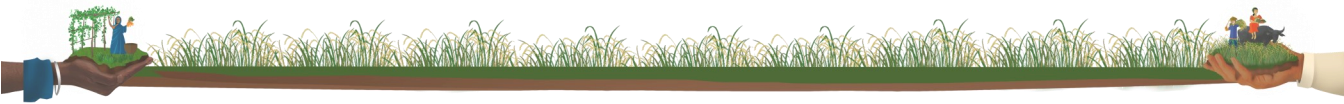
Rationale for choice of crop loan of BKB

The BKB Crop Loan Program has been chosen for study because it is the largest government credit program in the crop sector of Bangladesh. Though some other NCBs and PCBs operate in crop financing, the area, population, and portfolio coverage of BKB are much more comprehensive than other institutions. In FY 2020 to 2021, the total target of agricultural loan disbursement for 55 banks is BDT 26,292 crore (USD 3.1 billion); while the target of BKB alone is BDT 6,000 crore or USD 711 million (about 23 percent of the total) (BB, 2020). At least 60 percent of this (BDT 3,600 crore or USD 427 million) is expected to be distributed under the BKB Crop Loan. However, it needs to be mentioned here that there is no exclusive credit program for smallholder Boro paddy farmers in Bangladesh.

Description of crop loan of BKB

- **Objectives of program:** The core objective of BKB Crop Loan is to provide loan facilities for achieving self-sufficiency in food production and strengthening the rural economy. In the KIIs, BKB officials have mentioned that one of the key objectives of the program is to lend to “loan-seeking” smallholders who are at risk of leaving or limiting cultivation due to fund crisis.
- **Coverage of program:** The BKB credit program is not a part of any larger assistance package to smallholder farmers. Though it does not cover the whole country, it is not a regional program either. A part of the northern region of the country is covered by RAKUB,⁵ another national specialized bank. About three-fourths of the country's crop loans is covered by the BKB Crop Loan Program. The credit program covers all seasonal crops, including Boro paddy.

⁵ However, in Rajshahi division BKB has branch.



- **Clientele (target and actual):** Both landowners and sharecroppers are normal target groups for crop loans. According to a 2015 circular (BKB, 2015), the targeted clients of this credit program are as follows:
 - a. farmers who are actively involved in cropping throughout the year;
 - b. farmers who have been taking loans for a long time;
 - c. farmers having a bank account of BDT 10⁶ (USD 0.12);
 - d. farmers having a “farmer’s card”;⁷
 - e. landless farmers; and,
 - f. sharecroppers.

Though marginal farmers are eligible for the crop loan on paper, in reality, a portion of them do not have access to the loan. Rather, in FGDs, some of them shared their bad experiences (misconduct of BKB officials, bribing practices, etc.) when approaching BKB for a crop loan.

The government has no budgetary allocation for this credit program. As part of its incentive package, the government provides interest compensation (five percent due to the declining rate from nine percent to four percent) to the bank.

In most of the cases, actual clients of the credit program are the same as those who were initially targeted. The reasons behind the difference between the targeted and actual clients are as follows:

- Some original clients do not or cannot continue for their own reasons – they leave farming or go for farming with other sources of financing, including self-finance; and,
- The bank cannot satisfy the increasing demand of the clients – they want bigger amounts of loan with a lower interest rate and other fringe benefits.

In the beginning of the credit year, the BKB officials communicate with existing and old “good” clients so that they continue with the crop loan program. Whether the smallholders are among the so-called “good” clients is an important question. In the FGDs, very few smallholders were found to be continuous credit receivers from BKB. However, for targeting the new credit clients, the BKB officials claimed to do the following:

- They go to villages or communities to identify potential clients;
- They communicate with local agricultural officers for collecting a list of “real” farmers;
- They conduct household surveys in the remote areas; and,
- They disseminate information materials about the crop loan program.

Evidence of the above-mentioned activities is rarely supported by the FGD participants. Earlier in the first half of the last decade, the BKB officials distributed

⁶ A special bank account provision for the poor smallholder farmers.

⁷ A type of identity card for the farmers against which various government supports are provided.




loans in some open places like local markets, gatherings, etc. They did not continue this later on.

- **Credit channels:** The BKB credit program provides loans to clients through their branches (more than 1,000 throughout the country; a small number in greater Rajshahi region, where another regional public agricultural bank, RAKUB, operates). However, there are some outside actors like *dalals* (intermediaries) committing notorious acts in the channel (as noted in Box 2).
- **Program management and staffing:** In the local branches of BKB, the credit section is supervised by a branch manager. The person in charge of the credit section works with one or more credit officials who are directly involved with identifying potential farmer-borrowers.

The performance of the program management and staff is average; some of the officials are not welcoming to marginal farmers, especially indigenous ones. As there is a shortage of human resources, newly recruited young officers are sent to the field in some cases. Because of their inexperience, they could not reach the real marginal farmers.

Just after the independence of the country, BKB was a service-oriented bank. In the 1990s, it turned into a profit-oriented bank. According to the key informants, the evolution of the vision and mission of the bank may have an impact on the services provided to the clients. They have also mentioned about BKB officials' dissatisfaction of their compensation package, which may be a factor in this regard.

- **Strengths of the crop loan program:** Lower interest rate is the major strength of the BKB Crop Loan, followed by mass availability of the credit line. The strengths of the crop loan program emanate from the strengths and opportunities of the entire BKB credit program (Box 3).
- **Challenges of the crop loan program:** Bribes and hassles play as access barriers to the crop loan of BKB. Poor and marginal smallholder farmers cannot combat these bad governance elements. Such challenges stem from the weaknesses and threats of the entire BKB credit program (Box 3).
- **Types and amounts of loans and other financial assistance:** The BKB Crop Loan is disbursed as per norms set by Bangladesh Bank. The loan is sanctioned as a short-term loan on an annual basis. The interest rate for this loan was nine percent before the coronavirus pandemic. The rate was reduced to four percent recently to offset the losses suffered by crop producers due to the pandemic. However, this lower interest rate cannot give comfort to farmers when bribe money is associated with loan sanctions. Usually, no collateral is required up to cultivation of five acres (approximately two hectares) of land, according to the BB agricultural credit policy; in reality, many marginal farmers are refused the loan in the pretext of lack of land. Short-term crop loans (six to 18 months) are repaid in installments.



However, this lower interest rate cannot give comfort to farmers when bribe money is associated with loan sanctions. Usually, no collateral is required up to cultivation of five acres (approximately two hectares) of land, according to the BB agricultural credit policy; in reality, many marginal farmers are refused the loan in the pretext of lack of land. Short-term crop loans (six to 18 months) are repaid in installments.

Aside from loans, the crop loan program does not provide any other form of financial assistance. However, BKB officials have claimed that their credit officials give various financial advice to the farmers.

- **Support services:** Support services like training or supplementary input support are not adhered to by the crop loan program. As mentioned earlier, financial advice is provided to the loan recipients. The BKB officials have noted another loan package for agriculture equipment, but this package does not give any technical support to farmers under the crop loan. They have not deployed any experts to give training to the smallholder farmers for building or enhancing their capacity on the proper utilization of the crop loan. Farmers in the FGDs claimed that BKB officials hardly visit their farm fields.
- **Repayment rates:** Repayment of the loan is made upon harvest. Under the crop loan program, the amount of the loan (principal amount) varies according to the production plan of the farmers. However, the mode of repayment is the same across loan amounts.

As mentioned, about USD 427 million is distributed under the BKB Crop Loan Program in FY 2020 to 2021, of which about 90 percent (according to the key informants who are BKB officials) has been repaid. Hence, the overall repayment of loans of the credit program is about USD 384 million.

When farmer-borrowers do not or cannot pay their loans, their loan is rescheduled with a higher interest rate. According to the contact, the loan defaulter is supposed to undergo a certificate case, but BKB official officials claimed that they usually do not file a lawsuit against the defaulter. Rather, constant communication is made so that they can repay their loan immediately.





Box 3. Strengths, Opportunities, Challenges and Threats of BKB Loan Program

Strengths:

Extensive operational set-up: BKB operates through 1,038 branches all over the country. The strength of the BKB agricultural credit program is its presence in 50 districts, nine city corporations, and 607 unions of the country.

Well-established infrastructure: BKB has been trying to reach the rural community of the country since its inception. Its well-established infrastructure is manifested in seven corporate, 239 city, and 792 rural branches throughout the country. Infrastructure capability has made BKB one of the largest specialized banks in the country. BKB has also established 63 field level audit offices (nine at divisional and 54 at regional levels) as a part of its internal control, integrated compliance system as well as for smooth operations.

Veteran human resources: As one of the oldest specialized banks, BKB has experienced human resources despite inadequate manpower in some cases.

Lower interest rate: BKB extends its agricultural loan with comparatively lower interest rate.

Opportunities:

- BKB has been the most reliable formal source of agricultural credit.
- BKB, being a key specialized bank, has the privilege of being patronized by the government.
- With the increasing capital, BKB is characterized by plenty of programs targeting the rural community which will be extended further by public policy and interventions.
- BKB has wide social acceptance among the rural communities due to its diversified programs, government support, lower interest rate, and fastest-growing demand for agricultural credit.

Challenges:

- *Lengthy and intricate institutional procedure:* Long and complex institutional procedures are the vital drawbacks faced by farmers in securing agricultural credit from BKB.
- *Shortage of well-timed credit facility:* Lengthy and delayed loan approval processes act as major flaws in BKB's agricultural credit program.
- *Strong need for collateral:* The strict requirement for collateral in institutional sources like BKB in turn enforces plenty of formalities on credit seekers that make them inclined to take a loan from semi-institutional and non-institutional sources.
- *Poor institutional capacity:* Even though BKB has many branches in the rural areas, these are still inadequate against the requirement. Moreover, there are deficiencies in manpower, which often make the bank limit its operations.

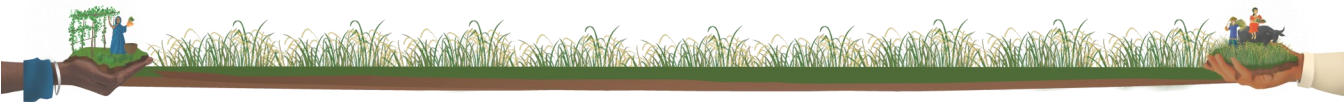
Threats:

- BKB credit is supposed to be allocated according to the relative efficiency of the cultivator rather than the economic and political supremacy of credit recipients.
- The prevalence of brokers or unscrupulous bank officials results in higher non-interest costs in loan transactions for the borrowers.
- The higher non-interest cost of BKB credit for the small farmers acts as a hindrance to the development of their productive forces.

Source: Deb et al. (2020)

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on crop loan program

Farmers could avail of a reduced interest rate (from nine percent to four percent) under the crop loan program as a COVID-19 pandemic incentive.



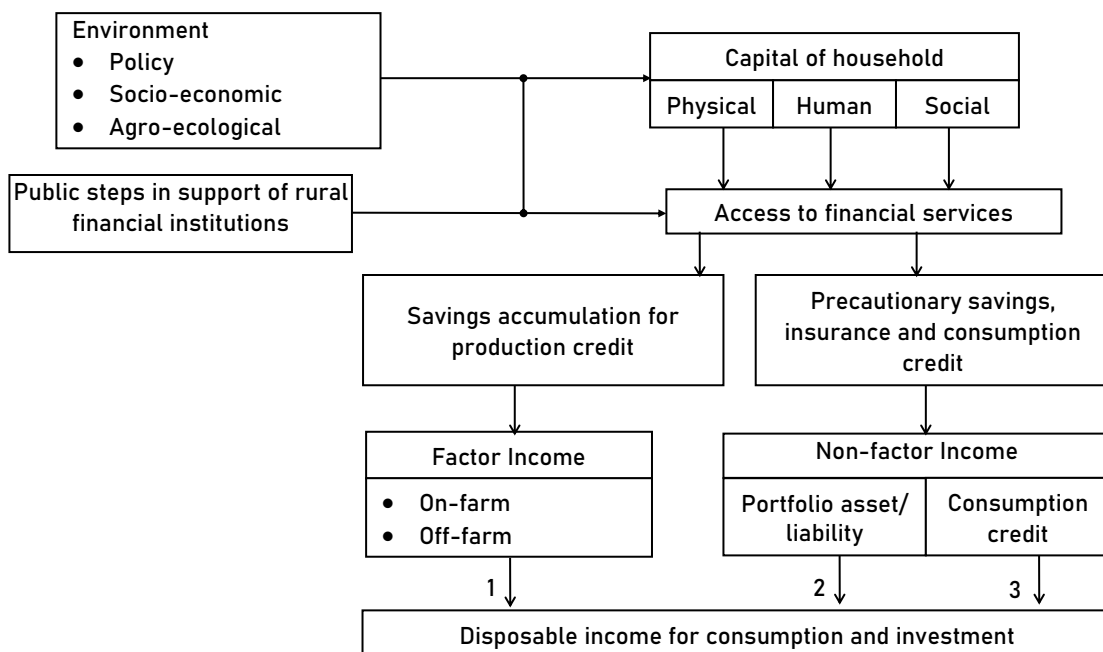
During the pandemic, BKB has taken steps according to the direction of the BB. The bank will disburse loans at a four-percent interest rate to the farmer against their target set by BB from their own sources as in previous years for the cultivation of cereals, cash crops, vegetables, and tubers, including paddy and wheat mentioned in the Agriculture and Rural Credit Policies and Programs. In this case, the bank will get the recharge facility of five percent interest rate according to their actual interest loss. The bank will have to pay compensation against loans disbursed at concessional interest rates. The bank participating in the disbursement of loans under the scheme will take all necessary steps to ensure the effective utilization of the loans given at concessional interest rates in favor of the actual farmers for the crops and crops mentioned in the scheme (BKB, 2020).

Credit needs of smallholder farmers

Introduction

As a commodity and/or service, agriculture credit has both demand side and supply side factors and actors (the latter are discussed in the preceding chapter). As a key demand side actor, farm households demand agriculture credit for augmented household welfare. For example, Zeller et al. (1997) found inter-linkage between household access to credit and food security of the household – a most important criterion for smallholder farm household welfare (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1: Inter-linkage between access to credit and food security



Source: Zeller et al. (1997)



Credit requirements of smallholder farmers

The credit requirements of smallholder Boro farmers are numerous. They need credit for buying production inputs like seed, fertilizer, insecticide, pesticide, and, for hiring labor. They use credit for farm investment purposes such as irrigation. Credit is required for household consumption, in particular, for family needs while the crop is growing. They also need capital for trade and working capital to get the best prices for the crop upon harvest.

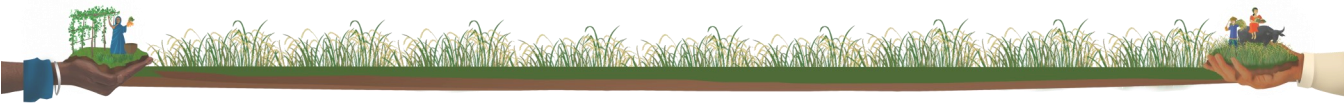
The crop loan of BKB addresses the production requirement of the Boro farmer. For an acre or 0.4 of a hectare (100-decimal) cultivation of Boro (hybrid), farmers get less than BDT 80,000 (about USD 940) covering the cost of fertilizer, seed, irrigation, insecticide, preparing the field for cultivation, wages, and land rent. The credit provision does not include two major costs – transportation and storage. It also excludes the “very much usual” price hike of inputs. FGD findings reveal that farmers have to cover 10 to 30 percent in additional costs from their own savings or other sources over the credit amount from BKB to complete production. KII with BKB officials also confirm the inadequacy of the crop loan.

The BKB credit program does not address all of the loan requirements of the smallholders. FGD findings disclose that very few smallholder farmers could draw the equilibrium of demand and supply of credit; a portion of these credit requirements remains unaddressed. Those who suffer from unmet credit demand either go for savings use, asset sale, and other sources of credit (mostly informal ones or microcredit with exorbitant interest rates) or leave a portion/all of the cultivation. The remaining portions are addressed by other government agencies or private sector credit players (moneylenders, traders, etc.).

Factors limiting the access of smallholder farmers to credit

Some factors limit the access of Boro paddy smallholder farmers to the crop loan. They are as follows:

- **Borrower eligibility requirements:** Any type (small, medium, or large) of Boro paddy farmer is supposed to be eligible to access the crop loan. But FGD findings expose that a significant portion of smallholder farmers could not get the loan due to lack of land or having insufficient amount of land (less than 100 decimals or 0.4 of a hectare) which is needed as collateral for credit. However, in the Kils, the BKB officials have denied that they refuse to extend the loan to the regular Boro paddy farmer even if s/he is landless or a sharecropper.
- **Credit procedures and processing time:** Complex procedures, such as filling out application forms (by illiterate farmers), roaming from one table to another, bribing, etc., and time loss discourage smallholder Boro farmers from opting for a crop loan. However, BKB officials in KII have denied these ill-doings.
- **Credit requirements:** A portion of the credit requirement is not met by the BKB Crop Loan (as discussed earlier) which acts as a limiting factor for some farmers to participate in the credit program. As mentioned, BKB officials also admitted to the inadequacy of the credit amount.



- **Non-prioritization of women farmers:** Though women and other marginal groups like indigenous people have some access to the crop loan, they did not receive proper attention from the officials, let alone get prioritized. An indigenous woman, in an FGD, described mistreatments by bank officials when she approached them for a loan.
- **Non-prioritization of or support for organic farming:** Though organic farming is encouraged in the annual agriculture credit policy of Bangladesh Bank (BB, 2020), it is yet to be a focus in the grassroots level. BKB officials admit that they support organic farming in the same way they support conventional cultivation but do not prioritize it. They do not link clients with other agricultural departments that promote organic farming.

Special requirements of smallholders in the COVID-19 pandemic

Interest-free, hassle-free, timely, and adequate credit assistance is required for smallholder Boro farmers during this crisis period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The BKB Crop Loan focuses only on production, and only partially. A full crop loan package, including complete coverage of production, storage, transport, and marketing, is warranted.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

Crop financing is integral in agriculture, but a portion of small farmers, who make up most of the 35.5 million agriculture farm households (around 45 percent of all households) in Bangladesh, do not have access to formal loan sources. A review of the BKB Crop Loan Program that smallholder Boro farmers could avail of has brought to light several barriers faced by prospective borrowers. Apart from irregularities in the conduct of loan assessments – such as bank officers taking bribes or refusing to grant credit to borrowers on the pretext that they do not have enough land – as well as the lukewarm reception of potential debtors by bank officers, the loan provision only partially covers production costs and does not include two major costs in agriculture: transportation and storage. The credit facility also does not prioritize marginalized groups such as women and indigenous farmers, or organic farming.

A section of smallholder Boro farmers cannot avail of the BKB Crop Loan. A section of the loan recipients cannot reap most of the benefits from the program. The failure of governance both in the BKB management and the national level plays key role in this exclusion and non-maximization of the credit program.




Recommendations

- **In relation to improving the policies and implementation strategies of BKB Crop Loan Program:**
 - a. Good governance should be ensured in the BKB management and administration so that good policies can be implemented well, and poor and marginal farmers could access the crop loan program comfortably.
 - b. The BKB credit policies and implementation strategies should include grassroots realities.
 - c. BKB officials should be properly trained on the annual Agricultural and Rural Credit Policy and Program of Bangladesh Bank so that they are well aware of the provisions for smallholder farmers.
 - d. The credit officials should be efficient and experienced enough to identify the real farmers, removing the intermediaries.
 - e. *Upazila*-wise, a gender-disaggregated listing of farmers must be developed and distributed to each branch of BKB to ensure the inclusion of all real farmers in the crop loan program.
 - f. The shortage of human resources at BKB should be addressed so that they can serve the loan applicants properly.
 - g. Information dissemination about the crop loan program should be made among the smallholder farmers.
 - h. A group or collective approach of lending should be taken.
 - i. The national identification card should be considered as collateral instead of 100 decimals or 0.4 of a hectare of land, so that landless farmers and sharecroppers can access the crop loan program.

- **In relation to ensuring gender equity in the policies and implementation of the crop loan program:**
 - a. Pro-women attitudes should be exhibited.
 - b. Measures should be taken to inform the women farmers about the crop loan.
 - c. Employing women credit officers in at least one BKB branch of each *upazila* (sub-district) is necessary.
 - d. A gender-disaggregated database of registered farmers needs to be created so that agricultural facilities including government credit can reach the farmers quickly.

- **In relation to ensuring sustainable or organic farming in the policies and implementation of the crop loan program:**
 - a. Organic farming initiatives should be acknowledged with greater significance (like a special package including interest waiver, flexible repayment schedule, other fringe benefits, etc.) in the program.
 - b. Wider dissemination of information is to be channelized to keep organic farmers well-informed about the program.
 - c. Target of inclusion of organic farmers in the crop loan program should be set at the level of the *upazila*.

- **In relation to addressing issues caused by COVID-19 in relation to credit assistance:**
 - a. An adequate loan amount covering costs from production to sales should be provided; the amount should be increased by one-third of the present loan amount.
 - b. There is a need to provide interest-free loan to the poor and marginal smallholder farmers.

- 
- c. Additional required support – both financial and non-financial – should be added to the crop loan program.
 - d. There should be scope of loan restructuring. BKB officials claimed that they prefer loan restructuring than issuing certificate case against loan defaulter farmer. ■

List of acronyms

ALRD	Association for Land Reform and Development	HYV	High Yielding Variety
ANGOC	Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development	JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
BB	Bangladesh Bank	KII	Key Informant Interview
BDT	Bangladesh Taka	MFI	Micro Finance Institution
BKB	Bangladesh Krishi Bank	MoA	Ministry of Agriculture
BRRRI	Bangladesh Rice Research Institute	MoL	Ministry of Land
CGAP	Consultative Group to Assist the Poor	NCB	Nationalized Commercial Bank
CLP	Crop Loan Program	NGO	Non-governmental Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization	NID	National Identification Card
DAE	Department of Agricultural Extension	NSB	National Specialized Bank
DSS	Department of Social Service	PCB	Private Commercial Bank
DWA	Department of Women Affairs	PKSF	Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation
DYD	Department of Youth Development	RAKUB	Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank
FGD	Focus Group Discussion	RDB	Rural Development Board
FY	Fiscal Year	SDF	Social Development Foundation
FYP	Five Year Plan	SMAP	Small and Marginal Sized Farmers Agricultural Productivity Improvement and Diversification Financing Project
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	USD	United States Dollar
GoB	Government of Bangladesh		
GR	Green Revolution		

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Executive Director, ALRD

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