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Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets (REOPA)

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Graduation of 1st Cycle Women Crew Groups in REOPA

Totally 11,640 destitute women have worked in road maintenance Women Crew Groups (WCGs) in 388 Unions from 15 February 2008 to 14 February 2010, maintaining over 11,500 km of earthen roads in the REOPA Project. The women were selected following a rigorous selection process with community participation, ensuring that women selected are assetless and being widowed or abandoned by their husbands or divorced/separated, or are living with a disabled husband who cannot work. They all represented female-headed households much below the poverty line.

During the two-year employment period each woman in this first WCG cycle has earned Tk. 48,430 paid as cash and has in addition an accumulated savings capital of Tk. 20,560 plus interest deposited in a savings bank account. The vision of REOPA is that these women will get a chance to permanently exit the vicious circle of poverty. Wages paid have ensured food sufficiency and satisfaction of other basic needs like improved housing, medical treatment and children's education during employment. Their savings will be invested in gainful micro-enterprises and provide a cushion to ensure food security even after the end of the project.

Very few safety net programmes have a strategy for graduating beneficiaries out of the programmes. REOPA is one of the few. Those safety nets that are linked to longer term income generation opportunities have proved to be more effective.



Out of the daily wage of Tk. 100 paid in REOPA, Tk. 30 is mandatory saving and women will continue to be assisted by REOPA Partner NGOs in how to prudently invest their cumulative savings in micro-enterprises. Linkages between service providers and the women beneficiaries in support of their future self-employment livelihood activities are also being established.

REOPA crew women have received training in nutrition, health, rights & entitlements, disaster preparedness, etc, as well as skills in managing micro-enterprises, conducted by Partner NGOs.

They have also been trained in how to organize,

lead and manage groups for mutual support after the end of the project. Habits of saving and investment have been encouraged through a system of rotating inter-lending through what is known as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCA).

Graduation ceremonies for the first WCG cycle were held at all six REOPA districts, with participation of WCG members, public figures and media representatives. All women of the first WCG batch received employment certificates for completing their two-year tenure with REOPA in graduation ceremonies arranged at Union level.

A second cycle of 12,804 WCG women will continue their road maintenance employment in REOPA up to 30 April 2011.



UNDP Country Director gives the end-of-tenure employment certificate to a WCG woman at a graduation ceremony arranged in Narsingdi district, attended by also the Secretary of LGD, the Ambassador of the EU Delegation, Project Director of REOPA, Deputy Commissioner-Narsingdi and other dignitaries.

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From safe wages to risky self-employment

Programmes providing an episode of temporary job creation cannot be expected to ensure employment across the life-course of beneficiaries, but including graduation from employment in the programme design is required. Well designed social safety net programmes serve purposes of both protection and promotion. A seamless transition from safety net wage employment to market-driven employment is a huge challenge, with a need for considerable investment in strengthening the agency of those in poverty. These two cases stories illustrate how this transition is happening in REOPA.

Story of a life salvaged

“Had I not been employed by REOPA, I would have been a prostitute in Bombay or Pakistan”, Rehana Khatun summarizes her life experience. Daughter of a poor day labourer in Satkhira district, Rehana was married when she was just an adolescent. Her husband was a vagabond with no income at all. Rehana accepted this as fate and tried her best to remain with her husband, but after getting to know that husband and mother-in-law had made an agreement with an Indian trafficker to sell her for 10,000 Taka, she fled to her mother’s house with her two sons. The mother was unable to provide daily meals and Rehana had to go for work as a maid servant in exchange for some food.

Things radically changed with her employment in REOPA. Rehana immediately started saving from her pay. She received training in running a small business and prepared herself to utilize the savings after completed employment tenure. She invested a portion of her savings in rice husking. She and her mother are now fully engaged in this business, earning about 250 Taka per day, significantly more than what she used to earn in REOPA. She is also the proud owner of a cow. Rehana is very happy with her newfound wealth, she is able to send her two sons to school and her dream is to give them a proper education that will help them find good jobs.



“After our REOPA employment, we will never feel small again.”

Rina Begum, a widow who just completed her 2-year employment

“REOPA women can take food three times a day, we have clothes, we are sending our children to school and we will not go to the government for rice as relief. “

Mayna Khaton, another graduated REOPA crew woman

Rokeya Khatun doesn't want to go back to REOPA work

Rokeya Khatun lives in a village called Abad Chandipur in Burigoalini Union of Satkhira district. Rokeya married when she was only 13 years old. Due to lack of money she had to leave her husband’s family. She was selected in the Union’s Women Crew Group and graduated 14 February 2010. Withdrawing some of the money she had saved during her employment from the bank savings account, she started small business of rice and dairy feed. Four days a week she attends several *haats* (weekly bazaar) to sell her goods.

Rokeya’s nephew has a rickshaw van, and she uses it together with her nephew to transport the goods to bazaars. Her average sale is 2,500 Taka, with



a net profit of 300 Taka per *haat*. On average her income is around 120 Taka per day. She is also getting income from her shop, rendering a net profit of 50 Taka per day. Her total daily income now is 170 Taka, which is more than what she earned through REOPA road maintenance employment. As a result she will not fall back into poverty. Rokeya now has a plan to cultivate some land to further augment her food security.

IGAs and future livelihoods

After completing two years of employment in REOPA, women have started Income Generating Activities (IGAs) by utilizing their capital accumulated in REOPA through both mandatory and voluntary savings. The most prominent IGAs undertaken by 1st cycle WCG members are livestock - cow and goat rearing, chicken and duck rearing, etc; agriculture - paddy, vegetables, horticulture, etc; and small business - grocery shops, tea stalls, cloth and ferry business, etc. The average capital size invested is Tk. 17,738 as observed from a sample of IGA monitoring data. Within a period of three months after graduation 35% of 1st cycle WCG members have made capital gains and 9% suffered initial capital loss, while the capital of 56% of the women remained unchanged during these first three months.

REOPA has already established linkage with Upazila livestock and agriculture departments through basic service delivery schemes that will help provide necessary support to WCG members to successfully run their business in these sectors. In order to consolidate the institutional support platform for livelihoods of WCG women, rallies and seminars have been organized at district and Upazila level, with the participation of representatives from district administration, Upazila, Union Parishad, banks and local business communities. These initiatives will certainly bring positive impacts to the lives and livelihoods of WCG members and minimize the risk of falling back to destitution.