

UBINIG, Bangladesh

Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona (UBINIG) – which means policy research for development alternatives – has been a Christian Aid partner organisation since 2004. Starting out in 1984 with an office in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, UBINIG now has nine *vidyaghars* (learning places) around the country.

It provides training for communities on a range of issues including trade policies, family planning, labour rights (especially for women employed in the clothing industry) and environmental concerns, and encourages communities to campaign for equality and justice, celebrate diversity and promote rights with social responsibility.

One of its most important areas of work is raising awareness in communities about trade rules. Protecting traditional seed distribution methods is particularly important – to ensure that poor farmers are not forced to buy and grow crops that are not beneficial in the long term.

Traditionally, most Bangladeshi farmers practise age-old agricultural techniques on small plots of land, using seeds saved from previous crops. But new

World Bank rules in the 1990s led to the privatisation of seed distribution in Bangladesh; seeds can now be imported, and private companies distribute hybrid seeds for rice, fruits, vegetables, spices and oils.

This has been disastrous for the poorest farmers, many of whom are women. They were forced to buy hybrid seeds, which are more expensive and need large amounts of fertiliser, pesticides and water, or are incompatible with local ecosystems. For many farmers, this resulted in devastating crop failure. The chemicals needed to grow these 'new' crops are particularly problematic, as poor farmers often do not know how to use them safely. Landless people who depend on fish stocks and wild plants have also been affected, as the chemicals kill off their food sources.

The new hybrid seeds also mean that women, who traditionally save seeds to plant the following year, are losing their knowledge of how to select the best seeds to save. Their expertise has sustained Bangladeshi agriculture for generations by ensuring the survival of thousands of different species of crops that support various ecosystems. The impact of hybrid seeds therefore has serious implications on women's role in society and on people's livelihoods.

UBINIG carries out research into the effects of trade policies and campaigns to overturn trade deals and other types of agreement that are imposing foreign agricultural methods onto local communities. UBINIG argues that these are against the moral and ethical values of farming communities and are reducing the choices available to Bangladeshi farmers.

CIPCA, Bolivia

The Centre for Research and Training of Peasant Farmers (CIPCA) was founded in Bolivia in 1971. Christian Aid has worked with CIPCA since 1997, when it opened a regional office in Beni state to work with indigenous Amazonian communities in Moxos province.

CIPCA runs a rural development programme, providing seeds, farm animals and fish. It also gives training in agricultural techniques and different types of farming. This helps farmers grow a wider variety of crops and diversify into keeping bees, chickens and woolless sheep.

CIPCA also helps indigenous communities fight for their land rights, which are under threat from large landowners who clear the forest for cattle ranching. Land is important: without it, people cannot grow food to feed themselves, earn a living and avoid poverty.

CIPCA's other activities include:

- helping indigenous communities work together to market and sell their produce for a fair price
- helping keep local culture and language alive by broadcasting a radio programme in local indigenous languages, and producing useful leaflets for indigenous communities
- researching peasant and indigenous economies, to help them find the best ways to improve their communities.

BIDII, Kenya

BIDII, which is the acronym for The Benevolent Institute of Development Initiatives, is a Kiswahili word meaning 'effort'. BIDII works in the hilly Machakos district of Kenya's Eastern Province, 65km southeast of the capital Nairobi. Even though it is relatively close to the capital, most people there depend on agriculture.

BIDII has been a Christian Aid partner organisation since 1999. It helps rural communities find appropriate local solutions to the problems they face, and equips them with the resources they need. BIDII bases its projects on the principle that 'what is built together, lasts longer'.

BIDII offers assistance to a number of projects in Machakos district. As well as running agricultural schemes, BIDII helps communities develop different income-generating projects so that they are not entirely dependent on agriculture. For example, BIDII supports the All Generations Lita Women's Self-

Help Group, which helps people earn a living from tie-dying, screen-printing, soap-making and soft-drink-making.

BIDII provides training for farmers in new agricultural techniques and forestry. It has helped communities undertake huge water projects in the area: one gravity-fed water system opened in April 2005 now brings water to 7,000 people.

BIDII also supports a project run by the African Brotherhood Church, which helps rural farming communities deal with the many difficulties they face. A lot of their work is geared towards an

annual show each May, which attracts thousands of farmers from the surrounding area. At the show, BIDII and the church hold demonstrations on:

- making the most of rainwater by planting crops in terraces
- improving harvests through grafting (attaching a twig from a tree to the stem of a seedling)
- producing nutritious food using ingredients such as banana buds and cassava leaves
- which seeds can be used to improve harvests
- making the most of the land available.

CARD, Malawi

Churches Action in Relief and Development (CARD) was formed in Malawi in 1995, and consists of 17 churches that work together to assist local communities. Christian Aid has supported CARD's work since 1998. CARD's main focus is on sustainable agriculture, but during floods and droughts it also helps with short-term relief work, such as distributing food and seeds.

CARD runs a farming-skills project in southern Malawi's mountainous and heavily populated Thyolo district, close to the Mozambique border, about an hour's drive from the city of Blantyre. The soil is poor, and many people struggle to grow enough food on their tiny plots of land that cling to the steep slopes. CARD runs workshops to train farmers in farming skills that will help them produce more food by living more sustainably. These include:

- making compost (most poor farmers can't afford fertiliser)
- making contour ridges and building check dams to stop soil and water from running down the hill
- caring for animals (such as goats) and using manure for compost

- growing trees with leaves that can be used to enrich the soil
- growing trees for timber
- planting vertiver grass to stop water from running off the land and causing erosion
- irrigating the land with foot-operated pumps or by diverting rivers, to help people grow crops year-round
- making fuel-efficient stoves and food warmers that use less firewood.

CARD has observed that, using these techniques, farmers can double their harvests and cope much better during drought. The trained farmers also pass these skills on to others in their villages, thus multiplying the effects of this work.

JF'PS, Nicaragua

The Juan Francisco Paz Silva (JF'PS) cooperative works to reduce poverty among local farmers in Achuapa region, northwest Nicaragua.

Christian Aid has been working with JF'PS since 1997, and recently helped it buy a more-efficient seed press.

JF'PS has more than 100 members, who each own a small piece of land. The cooperative sells or lends sesame seeds to the farmers and provides advice and training. After harvesting their crop, farmers sell it back to JF'PS for a fair price. The cooperative crushes the seeds to extract oil, using the new seed press. It is so much more efficient that six times more oil is extracted now (72 tonnes compared to 12). As a result, the cooperative sells more oil, and its members earn more money.

JF'PS sells the sesame oil to The Body Shop in the UK and Ireland, which uses the oil to make cosmetics. The Body Shop pays a fair price for the sesame oil, so JF'PS makes more money. This means it can pay more for the farmers' harvest and everyone achieves a better standard of living.

During the pressing process practically no part of the sesame plant is wasted. The stalks and leaves are used as fertiliser or sawdust, and the material left after pressing (sesame cake) is used to feed pigs and chickens.

JF'PS offers training in agricultural techniques. It has begun to farm more sustainably, diversifying crops by creating a vegetable garden enriched with organic fertiliser. It also runs a shop and a credit union, from which people can borrow small sums of money.

Mehrengez, Tajikistan

Mehrengez means 'merciful' in Tajik. The organisation was formed in 1997 after five years of civil war, and works in villages around Kurgan Teppa in the Khatlon region of Tajikistan, south of the capital, Dusanbe. This area has lost many men, who were either killed during the war, became sick or travelled to Russia to seek work. Most households are now headed by women, who have few skills to help them earn enough money to feed their families.

Mehrengez trains these women and their communities, teaching them new skills so that they can achieve more sustainable livelihoods. It runs literacy, sewing and dress-making classes and trains women to diversify their crops so that they can grow a variety of fruit and vegetables. Mehrengez also runs a micro-credit scheme, from which women can borrow small sums of money to set up businesses and trade fruit, vegetables and handicrafts at local markets.