Background

Recent trends in the vegetable sector indicate a shift towards the production of high yielding varieties (HYV) of vegetable and the seed required for it has thus become the single most essential input for vegetable farmers. Vegetable production is highly correlated with the quality of seed, and usage of quality seed has the potential to increase yield by as much as 10-15% (Anwar Faruque, 2009). However, the use of improved HYV vegetable seed is still very limited in Bangladesh, and according to the Ministry of Agriculture only 18% of the total requirement for seed for 2008-09 was supplied by the public and private sector. The remaining 82% (Prof. Dr. Golam A Fakir, 2009) are lower-quality seed retained by farmers. For a big part, usage is restrained by limited market access to the seed. Quality seed is not reaching the farmers in the more remote areas owing to weak distribution channels or, inaffordability on the farmers’ part to purchase the seed in case of availability. Therefore to increase the productivity of vegetable farmers, it is imperative to increase their access to affordable, quality seed.

Amongst the 100 or so seed companies in Bangladesh only about 10 have the reputation as suppliers of good quality seed. They do not have however a clear strategy to reach small farmers with their products. These small and marginal farmers use retained seed or buy from local seed sellers (termed as Mobile Seed Vendors, MSVs) in small local market places. Due to limited access to seed retailers and dealers (key sources of information and technical advice for farmers), these small and marginal farmers are less familiar with modern agricultural practices. As a result, their yields are significantly lower than that enjoyed by the larger farmers. Katalyst and its co-facilitator Action for Enterprise (AFE) are working to address this constraint by supporting companies to introduce “mini-packets” of seed for small and marginal farmers.

Target Beneficiaries

Small and marginal farmers, especially those in remote areas, are the target beneficiaries of the mini-packets.

Locations

Mini-packets are being launched by two major seed companies nation-wide, but most sales to date have been in the greater Bogra, Rangpur, Chittagong, and Barisal regions.

Major activities
In 2009, Katalyst undertook an intervention with Lal Teer Seed Limited (LTSL) under which MSVs were incorporated in the regular seed distribution channel. Some 5,000 small farmers were reached with quality seeds through this intervention, leading to higher sales revenue for the company, as well as higher yield for the farmers. However, further assessment revealed that the seed requirement for the smaller farmers is much less than that of the larger ones. It is therefore not cost efficient for them to buy the packets that are sold in the market currently, which carry a larger quantity of seed.

Based on the results of this assessment and subsequent dialogue with private sector seed companies, Katalyst and AFE decided to support two private sector seed companies (AR Malik & Co. Pvt Ltd and Lal Teer Seeds Limited) to facilitate:

- Developing a business plan to target small and marginal farmers with the appropriate quantity of quality seeds in mini packets at prices ranging from 10-20 BDT per packet;
- Designing attractive packaging and promotional materials for mini-packets of seed;
- Building and expanding capacity to market affordable quantities of quality seed to farmers through existing as well as alternative distribution channels where necessary and
- Demonstrating the appropriate use of quality seed to small and marginal farmers through community meetings and demonstrations.

**Early signs of achievements**

400,000 mini-packets of seed entered the companies’ distribution channels during the first three months (between September and November 2011), and the companies are facing an overwhelming demand for the seed from their dealers and retailers. It is estimated that by March 2012 approximately 70,000 farmers will have increased yield due to their ability to purchase appropriate quantities of high quality seed at affordable prices.

**Way forward**

Over the next few months Katalyst and AFE will work together to identify the most effective means of expanding access of the affordable mini-packets of quality seed to small and marginal farmers (including women cultivating vegetable near their homes or in the homestead itself). Katalyst and AFE will then work with the companies to expand their ability to provide quality seed to small and marginal farmers, especially in remote areas. Upcoming activities will include community meetings and homestead demonstrations that will showcase cultivation techniques of higher yielding varieties of vegetable (and also particularly, how to use the area around the household to cultivate vegetable) through the companies’ regional staff and distribution channel actors. Other alternative distribution channels will also be explored in order to reach small farmers in remote areas.