

## Caritas' 'green revolution' promotes tribal people's self-reliance

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**BANDARBAN (UCAN)** -- Uthaingga Marma, 24, from the largely Buddhist Marma tribal community, was unemployed until he found out about the Caritas Horticulture Development Project (HDP).

"I couldn't continue my education due to extreme poverty. My father could barely support our family with little income so I sought for ways to earn a living," he told UCA News.

He says he found out about the Caritas project in December 2007.

The special project, initiated by Catholic Church's social arm, is paving the way for tribal peoples' self-reliance while helping protect the environment in the southeastern Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region.

Marma says his family has a small house but no cultivable land. He met with an HDP manager who guided him through a five-day practical training on horticulture and nursery management, and now is part of Caritas' "green revolution" in CHT Marma.

"With a loan about 7,000 taka (US\$100) from HDP, I started my nursery on leased land," he said, adding that Caritas provided him with seeds, bags and machinery.

Following the advice of HDP, he sowed seeds of different kinds of trees in his nursery that could be harvested for timber, and planted 100 hybrid papaya saplings.

Up to August this year, Marma had sold 52,400 saplings worth about 296,800 taka, paid his landlord and repaid his loans to HDP. His King Nursery at Lama subdistrict in Bandarban now has a stock of 120,600 saplings of different timber-producing trees.

Marma says income from the sale of 2,500 kilograms of hybrid papayas in less than two years has earned him 50,000 taka.

"The Caritas program helped change my life," said a thankful Marma. He now plans to extend his business, doubling the land he is using and using the additional land to produce flowers.

Shuva Tonchonggya was also able to change her poverty-stricken life thanks to Caritas' HDP, although taking a slightly different route. She began kitchen gardening near her home in Rajasthali subdistrict in Rangamati district.

She and her husband used to practice slash and burn agriculture, called jhum in the region, producing various crops but without any training. As a result, productivity was low. She too learnt about Caritas HDP and attended a five-day horticulture training course.

Now the 30-year-old Buddhist woman, a tribal Tonchonggya, earns 4,000-4,400 taka per month selling hybrid papayas from her kitchen garden.

“Caritas HDP has shown me the way to change my life,” a grateful Shuva told UCA News. “I don’t need to go far away from home the way I did for jhum and instead earn my living at home.

We can afford education for our three school-going kids which was very difficult before.”

Marma and Tonchonggya are just two examples of 6,750 tribal people who are benefiting from the Caritas project for Lama, Alikodom, Rajasthali, and Thanchi subdistricts in Bandarban and Rangamati, two of three hilly, forested CHT districts. Of those being assisted, only 375 of them are tribal Christians and the rest are Buddhists.

“In 1991, Caritas started HDP to help poor tribal people cultivate their land properly to get a better income,” HDP manager Atul Krishno Majumder told UCA News.

He said that about 2,400 hectares of tribal lands are now part of that plan that has reduced slash-and-burn agriculture which destroys forests and creates ecological imbalances.

HDP also provides legal support for the beneficiaries of the project as there are frequent clashes between tribal people and Bengali migrant settlers. The settlers claim the ancestral tribal lands for their own and have access to a government Refugee Holding Card, whereas most of the tribal people have no land documents.

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