When ACF first started its intervention in Farakka, most of its farmers were growing rice through the traditional method. They had little exposure to newer farming technologies or access to training. ACF introduced the Systematic Rice Intensification (SRI) method in the Farakka, Sagardighi and Murshidabad-Jiaganj blocks of the district. Four hundred farmers took up cultivation on 451 acres of land. Over a period of three years, they reaped an increase in yield from 17 quintals of paddy per acre to 27 quintals per acre.

ACF supports farmers with regular training and exposure visits for effective implementation of this process. The SRI method of cultivation has now been adopted by more than 600 farmers. The farmers also grow crops like mustard, wheat, lentil and grass pea for domestic and commercial use. As part of our horticulture promotion, 4191 mango saplings were planted by 336 beneficiaries in three villages. Regular animal health camps and awareness sessions were also organised in the region to help the farmers take care of their livestock. Farakka has an abundance of water resources and hence ACF has been supporting farmers to take up fish farming as an alternative source of income. Farmers have been trained in pond cleanliness, fish rearing and other relevant technology. This is a small initiative, but the results have been encouraging.

**Comprehensive Healthcare**

ACF in Farakka focuses on various aspects of healthcare. Since open-defecation is a common practice, ACF motivated people in five villages to build low cost toilets. Three hundred families took up the initiative with support from ACF. Sessions were held on safe drinking water, and the installation of 23 hand pumps benefitted 1000 families. Safe motherhood is another important focus area. Awareness programmes are held on mother and child care, immunisation, nutrition and sanitation. Kitchen gardens are promoted to ensure that families have access to nutritious food.

We also support the national Pulse Polio Eradication Programme; our work has been appreciated by WHO. The healthcare activities include medical and eye camps for the community, and awareness camps on HIV and AIDS.
Street plays are an important communication tool to reach out to communities on the issue of HIV and AIDS
Supporting Education

ACF runs non-formal education (NFE) centres for school dropouts in six villages, where 46 children between the ages of six and 14 were enrolled during the year.

The NFE centres have generated interest among the children. They empower the kids with literacy skills that enable them to enter the formal school system. ACF’s work is supported by the VECs, through which land was donated by the community to construct four permanent structures for NFE children.

Women’s Empowerment

ACF supports 25 SHGs with a membership of 311 women. Internal loans have been taken mainly for reasons like marriage, house construction or education; many women are now seeking loans for paddy cultivation and other small business ventures.

ACF supported this trend with capacity building workshops on income-generation activities. A six-month refresher course on tailoring was conducted for 24 trained members to equip them with new techniques and better market linkages. All of them are now involved part time in the tailoring business, earning ₹2000-3000 per month.

Three exposure visits were organised for 50 SHG members to understand about the livestock business, handicrafts and kitchen gardens. Regular training was also held on SHG management skills. SHG members were also involved in health camps, the pulse polio campaign, and generating awareness on sanitation and safe drinking water in their communities.

Infrastructure Development

ACF supports rural communities around the Company with need-based infrastructure. Our activities included building roads; providing furniture and electricity to schools; building community centres; and deepening ponds for water conservation, implemented in participation with local communities.

ACF has also constructed an office building and guardroom for the Block Office.

SANKRAIL

Agro-based Livelihood

System of Rice Intensification (SRI) methodology has helped farmers increase production and profit. The SRI project has benefitted more than 1200 farmers. ACF supports nine farmer clubs in Sankrail with focus on institutional building. These clubs link with the KVK and the Block Livestock Department, which assist them in agriculture and allied activities.

Members of farmer clubs are also involved in village development activities. They undergo training on topics like pest management, fish culture, SRI and organic farming organised by ACF. To promote pisciculture as an alternative source of livelihood, farmers have been trained on pond management, feed management and other aspects of fish rearing. To date, 126 farmers have taken up this activity to supplement their income.

Comprehensive Healthcare

Our health-related activities in Sankrail include organising medical camps that offer basic health services to the rural community. In 2012, we organised 137 health camps; 31 paediatric camps; and five eye check-up camps. ACF also conducts blood donation camps and collaborates with the public health system in the implementation of the National Pulse Polio Programme; the programme reached out to over 25000 children during the year.

Maternal health has so far been neglected in Sankrail due to poverty and lack of correct information. To address this challenge, ACF conducts regular gynaecological camps that include medical consultation and awareness sessions on safe motherhood. In 2012, 39 camps benefiting 819 women were organised.

HIV and AIDS Prevention Programme

ACF addresses the issue of HIV and AIDS among high-risk groups of truckers and migrant workers in the region in collaboration with Apollo Tyres Foundation and the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control Society (WBSAP&CS).
The programme includes condom promotion, counselling and referral services. Issue-based interaction has been introduced at the project sites with flash cards and STI flip charts and has elicited very good response from the target audience. This activity is led by 39 trained peer educators. ACF also supported 100 children of PLWH with study material to enable them to continue their education in school.

Supporting Education

ACF has established NFE centres in Sankrail that provide education to out-of-school children. Established near the Sankrail railway station, the students are mainly those who are employed in small shops around the station. The curriculum at the NFE centres is designed to be taught in an interactive and fun-filled manner. Drawing and dance classes provide these young children with scope for creativity. ACF also promotes adult literacy among SHG women in collaboration with the State Resource Centre for Adult Education, West Bengal. Currently, ACF runs seven centres with 83 women; the intervention has enabled them to improve their reading, writing and book keeping skills.

Women’s Empowerment

ACF works with 392 members in 43 SHGs. Women are involved in small scale activities like making incense, cultivating mushrooms and selling fish. They also participate in capacity building programmes and training to improve their business ventures.

Infrastructure Development

Developing the infrastructure at schools in the villages around Sankrail was one of the major activities during the year. It included construction of boundary walls, classroom renovation, provision of benches for classrooms, and school walls painting by ACL volunteers.

In the villages, ACF helped construct access pathways to unconnected inhabitants; installed six deep tube wells for drinking water and put up 19 solar lamps at strategic points. ACF also supported the construction of four ashralayas (low cost homes) and renovated the Jhorehat Cricket Playground.

Against all odds

Raghunath Mata from Kalinagar village of Ulluberia block in Howrah district is a paddy farmer. Like many others in his village, he realised that profits from cultivating paddy were steadily decreasing. He had to fend for his wife and young sons. Raghunath’s case was all the more challenging because he was visually impaired.

When ACF conducted a needs assessment in 2008 in Howrah district, better farm practices emerged as a dire need. To address this issue, ACF selected the SRI method of growing paddy. Extensive demonstrations and training sessions were conducted in the community to promote the method.

At first Raghunath, like many others, was sceptical. But he still decided to try out the SRI method of farming on less than 4 acres of land, along with the others. They received inputs on preparation of organic manures, bio-pesticides and vermin compost. He began to use fewer chemical pesticides and fertilizers, bringing down costs considerably. He also went on exposure visits to other farms, and applied the lessons learnt to his own plot. The results were very positive. The programme which began with 4 acres of land and 10 farmers in 2008 has now spread to 44 villages and covers more than 1500 acres. SRI has demonstrated a 43.3% increase in yield. The farmers’ collective income has increased from ₹ 18963 to ₹ 42258 per hectare. Today, Raghunath vouches for the effectiveness of this method of cultivation. With less chemical input, the quality of the soil has improved considerably; his costs are down, and the yield better. As for his family, it has brought them hope for a self-sufficient future.