



Anchoring the systemic development of the chars: lessons from the M4C in Bangladesh

6 March 2025



Helal Hussain

Country director
Bangladesh
Swisscontact



Syeda Zinia Rashid

Programme Manager
Embassy of Switzerland in
Bangladesh



Harald Bekkers

Founder & CEO,
Opportunities Unlimited



Context and Objective



Partnership for Poverty Reduction:

A collaboration between Bangladesh and Switzerland through the M4C project, mandated by the Embassy of Switzerland, to address extreme poverty in disconnected and climate-vulnerable char areas

Market-Driven Solutions:

M4C project began to introduce sustainable, market-driven solutions for char farming households, focusing on agriculture and livestock as commercially viable capitals.

Achievements & Collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh

Decade of Market Development: 2012-2024

Financial contribution amplified from 16% to 25% (**1.8 million CHF**) of the total budget in the final phase.



Institutionalisation of char development through the capacity building of the **Chars Development Research Centre (CDRC)**.

What M4C is Leaving behind for the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh



A public institution to carry the legacy

○ ○ ● ○ ○



Sustainable Market Linkage

○ ● ○ ○ ○



Private sector engagement in thin market context

○ ○ ● ○ ○



Experience of financial inclusion

○ ○ ● ○ ○



Climate Resilience & Adaptation

○ ○ ● ○ ○

A large, stylized globe on the left side of the slide. The globe is composed of a network of grey lines connecting various points, with some points highlighted in blue, yellow, and green. The continents are depicted in a light grey, dotted pattern. The globe is surrounded by a field of small, scattered dots in blue, yellow, and green, extending towards the right side of the slide.

Anchoring Systemic Development in the Chars

Lessons for donors, development practitioners
and government agencies

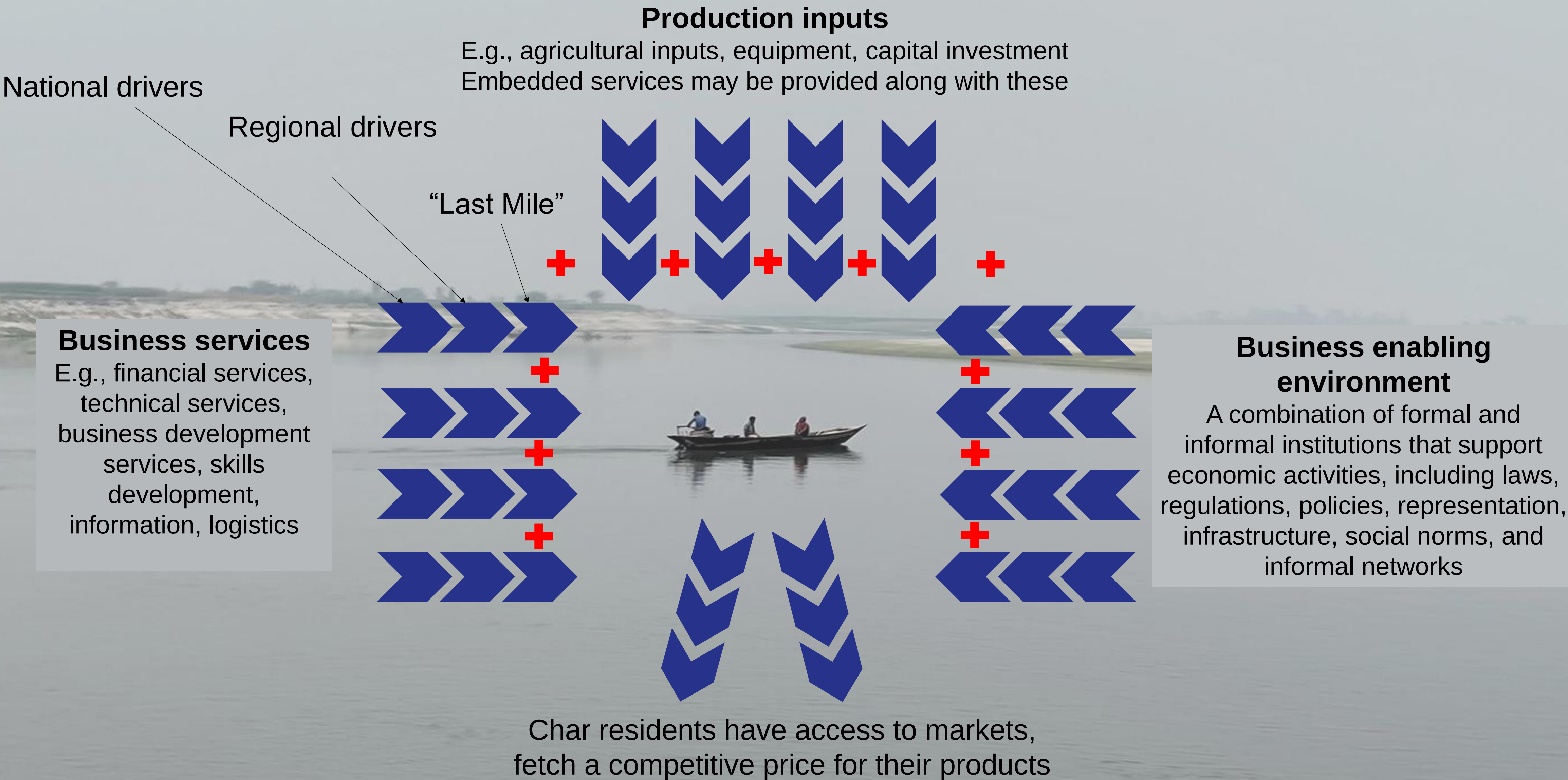
March 2025

The Issue – Inaccessible new land

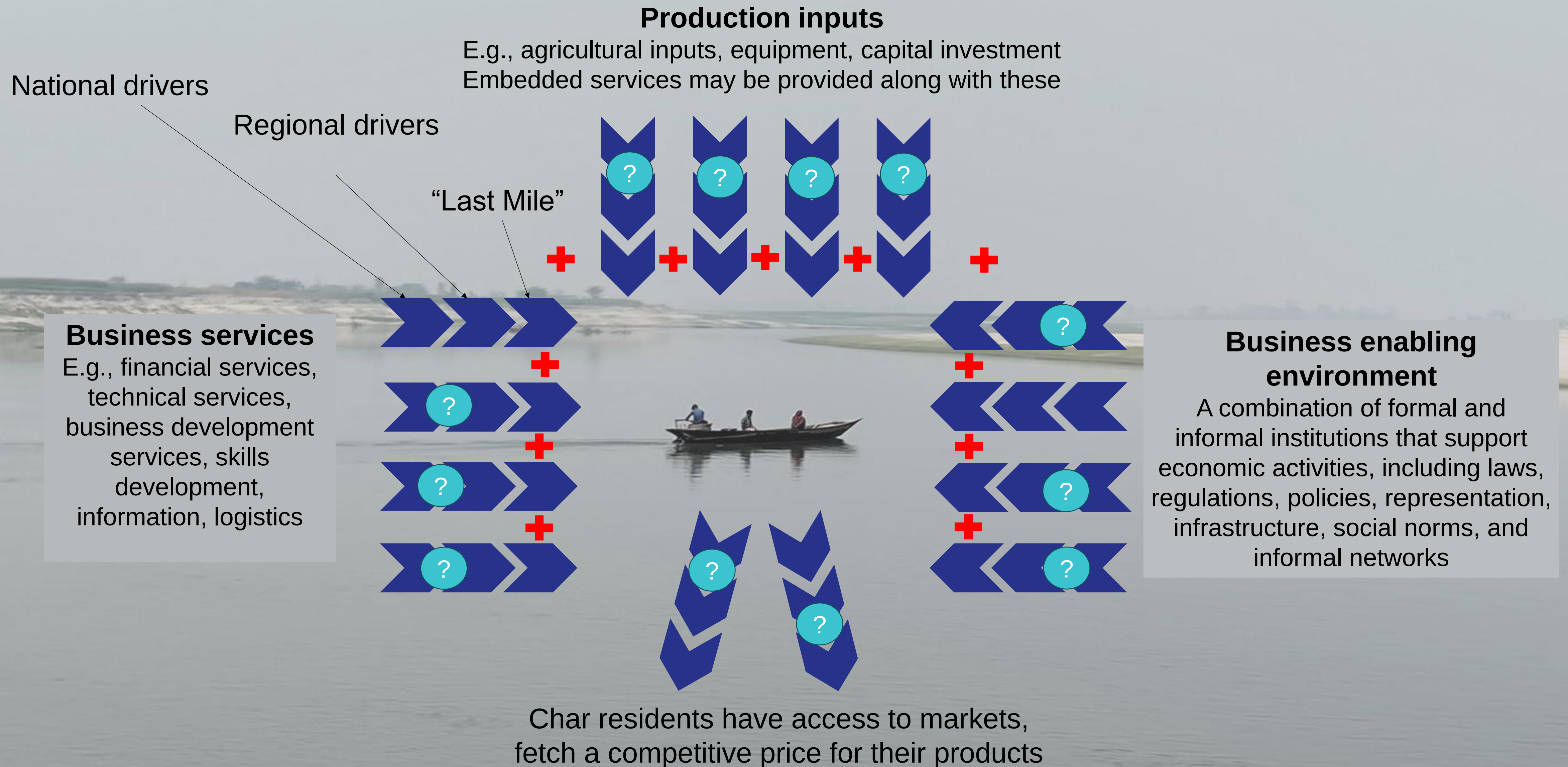


- Distinct geography: Islands in rivers prone to erosion and flooding
- Weak market functions: Inadequate infrastructure, few small and medium enterprises (SMEs)
- Limited access to agricultural inputs, markets and financial services
- Initially supported with a livelihoods approach (CLP), followed by a focus on a systemic approach (Katalyst, M4C).

Vision: Facilitating inclusive market systems



Reality: Fragmentation, gaps, questions about the 'unknown'



Addressing system gaps in the Chars



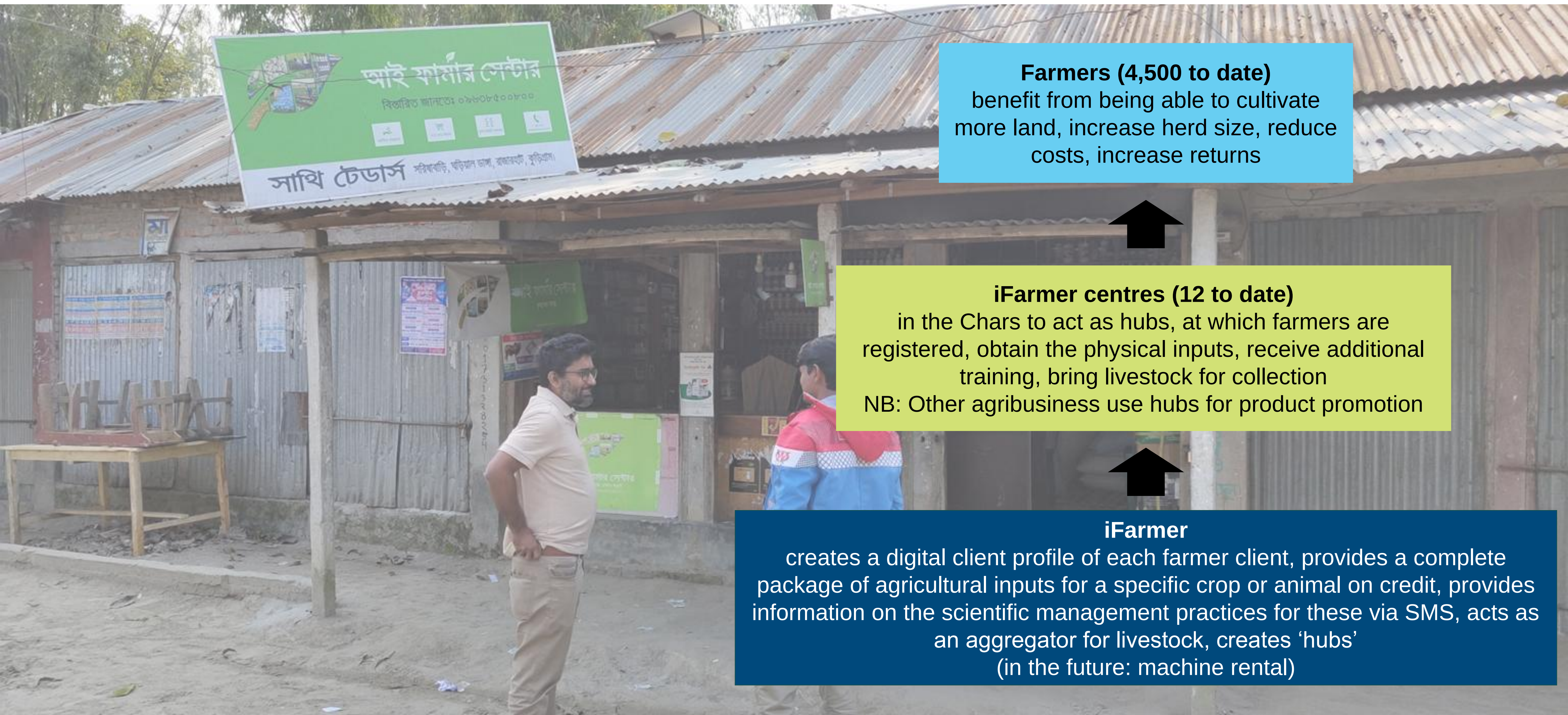
Last mile investment and innovation:

- Establishment of floating pontoons for accessing mainland markets
- Establishment of seedling nurseries and poultry hatcheries
- Establishment of artificial insemination services
- Significant increase in agro-input retailers (72 in 2012 to 1,575 in 2023)
- Investment in one-stop shop solutions: 6 **Agrigate** one-stop service center for (pre-financed) agri-inputs and market linkages; 12 **iFarmer** centers for inputs, finance, aggregation; digital financing and market linkage platform for rural entrepreneurs in 2 char districts by **WeGrow**
- Introduction of low-cost mobile solar-powered irrigation solutions
- Establishment of portable storage systems with warehouse credit facilities

Private Sector Expansion:

- **Petrochem Bangladesh Limited** expanded input distribution to chars
- **United Seeds Store Ltd.** sought partnerships with M4C to enter new chars
- **Super Star Renewable Energy Ltd.** developed low-cost solar-powered irrigation systems tailored for chars
- **United Commercial Bank (UCB)** engaged in microfinance partnerships for financing small-scale entrepreneurs in the chars

Example: iFarmer centres



Farmers (4,500 to date)
benefit from being able to cultivate more land, increase herd size, reduce costs, increase returns

iFarmer centres (12 to date)
in the Chars to act as hubs, at which farmers are registered, obtain the physical inputs, receive additional training, bring livestock for collection
NB: Other agribusiness use hubs for product promotion

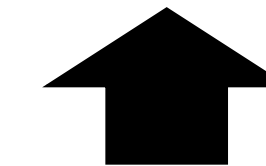
iFarmer
creates a digital client profile of each farmer client, provides a complete package of agricultural inputs for a specific crop or animal on credit, provides information on the scientific management practices for these via SMS, acts as an aggregator for livestock, creates 'hubs' (in the future: machine rental)

Example: Portable storage facilities



Farmers

- Use warehouse credit to access loans for the next cultivation cycle
- Store crops securely, reducing post-harvest losses and climate risks
- Delayed sales until market prices increase, maximizing returns



Storage Service Provider (6 to date)

- Co-invested in portable storage facility with insulated roofing (climate proofing)
- Partnered with MFIs to enable credit for farmers based on stored crop value, ensures that outstanding loans are settled when crops leave the warehouse



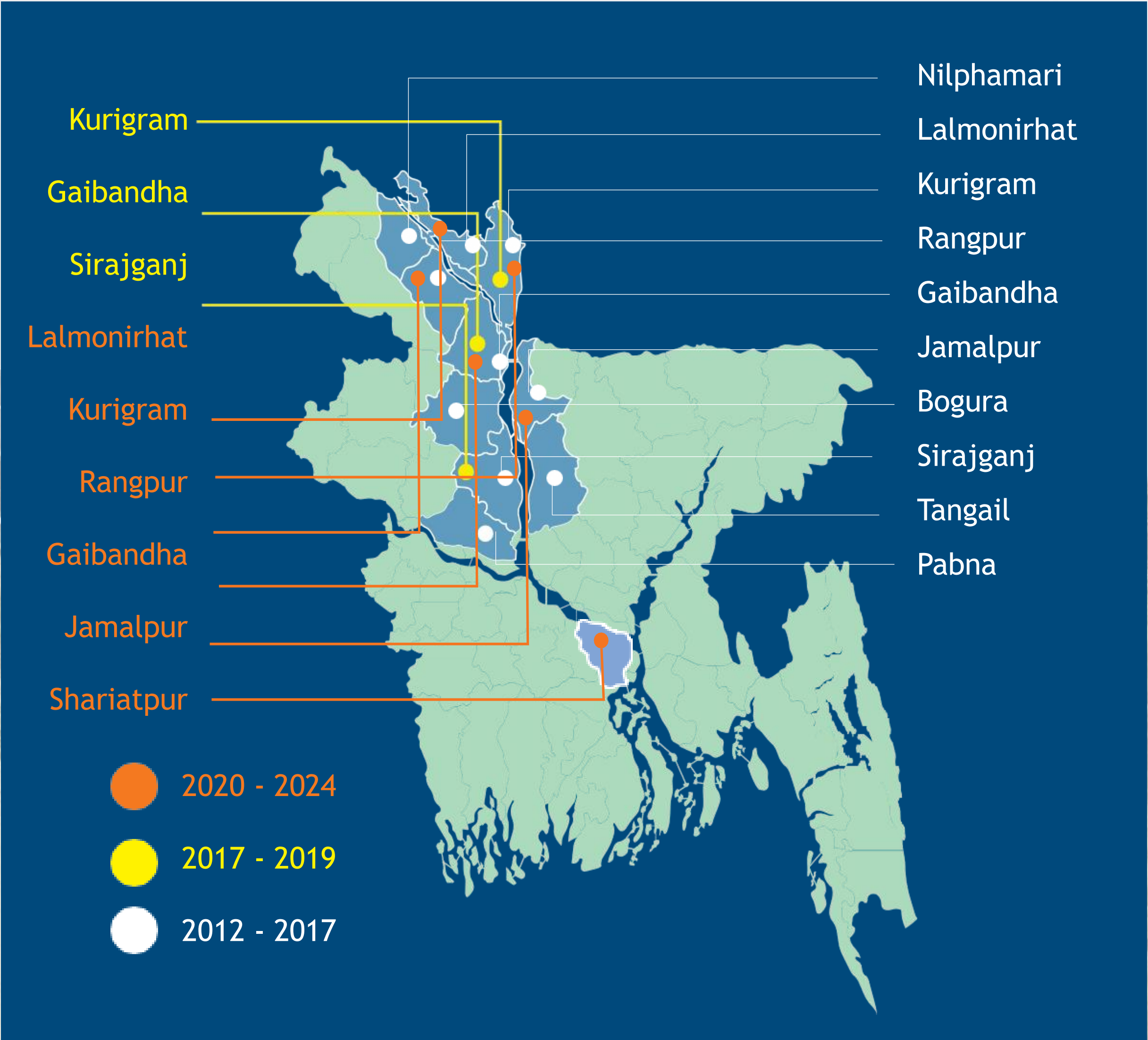
Centre for Development and Research of the Chars (CDRC)

- Designed portable storage suitable for Chars (can be broken down and moved)
- Identified potential operators, trained these
- With M4C support developed the warehouse receipt system, later brought in micro-finance organizations

M4C coverage vs. total number of chars



	Total	M4C coverage
Number of chars	2,042	127
Number of districts with chars	30	11
Char population	6.5 mil	145,000



How to institutionalize systemic development that can expand reach, close gaps over time?

Facilitating regional and national companies to include the Chars in their business models

Innovation and investment in last-mile SMEs (models, finance & skills) to anchor business activity in the Chars

Coordination between public and private actors

Facilitating public organizations to prioritize and navigate the Chars

A champion 'trailblazer' who knows the Chars, can reduce the risk of working in the Chars

Research on, advocacy for the Chars



AN ANCHORED APPROACH IN ACTION

Investment in and support for local entrepreneurs to address missing market functions



Partnerships with financial institutions to support financial inclusion of the chars



Partnerships with the private sector to extend their reach and investment into the chars



Share research and information with the private and public sectors



Policy advocacy to ensure inclusion of the chars



Communicating the potential of the chars through media and stakeholder engagement



Partnerships with the public sector to ensure infrastructure and services planning and investment in the chars



CDRC

- Have the right number of staff with the right skills
- Strengthen internal systems approaches to facilitate a market systems approach
- Mobilise funding and create revenue streams

Lessons and Impact

Key Lessons:

- A well-anchored systems approach can lead to sustained market access
- Public-private collaboration is crucial for scaling impact and successful exit
- Systemic change requires both private sector incentives and public sector anchoring
- Institutionalization is essential for long-term development beyond project funding

Demonstrated Impact:

- CHF 7 million disbursed in loans to 28,000+ farmers and entrepreneurs
- 200,000+ households benefited from improved services from more than 3,000 service providers
- CDRC invested CHF3.7 million in 3 phases in programme implementation





Q&A session