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Solar Energy for Agricultural Resilience (SoLAR) Phase II Inception Workshop in Bangladesh

Workshop Report

October 27, 2025

Amari Dhaka Hotel,
Gulshan-2, Dhaka,
Bangladesh

International Water Management Institute (IWMI)

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International Water Management Institute (IWMI)

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The authors are also grateful for the invaluable contributions and insights provided by representatives from the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC), the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA), Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL), and the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC). Finally, we thank our development partners from the World Bank and the European Union, along with all participating research institutions and stakeholder organizations, for their input and review of the workshop outcomes

About:

The Solar Energy for Agricultural Resilience (SoLAR) Phase 2 project builds upon learnings and experiences from Phase 1 of SoLAR (2019-2024) in South Asia while expanding its scope to East Africa through meaningful south-south collaborations. The program aims to strengthen the enabling environment and unlock investments for the sustainable scaling of socially inclusive and climate-resilient solar agri-tech solutions in South Asia (India and Bangladesh) and East Africa (Ethiopia and Kenya). Read more: www.solar.iwmi.org

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Front cover photo: Stakeholders and participants gather for a group photo at the SoLAR Phase II Inception Workshop in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on October 27, 2025. (*photo: Ether Communications for IWMI)*

Disclaimer:

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Contents

Highlights of the Workshop

The SoLAR Phase II Inception Workshop marked a strategic transition from pilot interventions to the large-scale, sustainable adoption of solar irrigation in Bangladesh. Key highlights include:

- **National Scaling Targets:** Following the 2022 energy crisis, the Government of Bangladesh has prioritized the replacement of **1.2 million diesel pumps** with solar alternatives. This transition is backed by an ADB roadmap requiring 45,000 units at an estimated cost of **USD 1.8 billion**, directly supporting the country's NDC goals for emission reductions.

- **Technological & Ecological Integration:** A major consensus emerged on "bundling" technologies. Panelists emphasized integrating **Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD)** with solar irrigation to manage water efficiency. Furthermore, **Agrivoltaics** and **grid-connected pumps** were identified as critical for maximizing land utility and providing farmers with secondary income through energy sales.

- **Institutional Coordination & Data Governance:** Stakeholders called for a **dedicated custodian agency** to manage integrated sector datasets. Experts highlighted the need for a unified "Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus" approach to ensure solar expansion does not lead to groundwater depletion and remains socially inclusive.

- **Innovative Finance & Living Labs:** Phase II will utilize **"Living Labs"** real-world demonstration spaces to co-design solutions with farmers. Efforts will focus on **blended finance** and **pay-as-you-go models** to lower the high upfront costs that currently act as a barrier for small and marginal farmers.

Summary

Project Background

SoLAR Phase II (2025–2028) is a regional initiative supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Building on the foundational success of Phase I (2019–2024), the project aims to foster an enabling environment for the sustainable, socially inclusive, and climate-resilient scaling of solar agri-tech solutions. While Phase I focused on South Asia, Phase II expands its footprint to East Africa (Ethiopia and Kenya), facilitating meaningful South-South collaborations. The project operates across four pillars: evidence-based policy design, innovative finance acceleration, capacity building, and the establishment of "Living Labs" for real-world testing.

Rationale for the Workshop

The inception workshop was convened to bridge the gap between high-level policy goals and ground-level implementation in Bangladesh. With the government targeting the replacement of 1.2 million diesel pumps with Solar Irrigation Pumps (SIPs), there is an urgent need to align multi-stakeholder efforts. The work of Solar Phase II will build on the work conducted alongside IDCOL and partners in SLAR Phase I. The workshop served as a platform to unpack key barriers and opportunities for scaling solar solutions in the agricultural sector in Bangladesh. Specifically, the workshop helped to:

- Socialize the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Index and solar suitability mapping tools and get key stakeholder feedback
- Co-develop financial instruments to ensure equitable access for smallholder and marginal farmers.
- Strategize the "bundling" of solar technology with Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) and groundwater monitoring to ensure environmental sustainability.

Participant Overview

The workshop brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including senior government officials from SREDA, BARC, DAE, BADC and BMDA, as well as representatives from international development partners like the World Bank and European Union including 69% male (22) and 31% female (10) participants.

Workshop Objectives

- Present the vision and strategic framework of SoLAR Phase II
- Identify pathways to accelerate financing for scaling solar energy
- Develop roadmaps for integrating evidence-based policies & capacity-building initiatives
- Promote knowledge exchange and south-south cooperation

Summary of Sessions

Opening Session

Dr. Jayanta Bhattacharya, SoLAR Country Lead – Bangladesh (IWMI), welcomed participants representing government agencies, development partners, private sector organizations, and research institutions. He outlined the workshop's objectives and emphasized the multi-stakeholder collaboration required to advance Bangladesh's transition to solar irrigation.

He discussed the growing challenges posed by climate change to agriculture, livelihoods, and food security. Agriculture contributes significantly to national GHG emissions, largely due to diesel-powered irrigation. In response, the Government of Bangladesh is prioritizing renewable solutions like Solar Irrigation Pumps (SIPs) to enhance energy security and reduce fossil fuel dependency. Following the 2022 energy crisis, the Prime Minister announced a target to replace all 1.2 million diesel pumps with solar alternatives. The ADB roadmap (2023) estimates that 45,000 SIPs costing USD 1.8 billion are required for full replacement. This transition aligns with Bangladesh's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) goals under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Welcome Remarks and Context Setting

Dr. Alok Sikka, Country Representative – India & Bangladesh / Senior Fellow, IWMI welcomed all participants on behalf of IWMI and CGIAR and provided an overview of their global mandates. He explained that CGIAR is a global research partnership dedicated to transforming food, land, and water systems in the context of the climate crisis, operating through integrated programs that promote sustainable and equitable food systems. He also highlighted that IWMI, headquartered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, works across more than 55 countries through its offices in 15 countries, focusing on water and land management, agricultural water management, climate financing, and the circular economy.

He highlighted IWMI's re-engagement in Bangladesh over the last five years through the SDC-supported SoLAR Project and shared updates on ongoing collaborations, including an MoU with the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC). He acknowledged IRRI for hosting the event and thanked the team for their support.

Opening Remarks

Ms. Divya Kashyap Sharma, Deputy Head of International Cooperation Office in India, Embassy of Switzerland in India warmly welcomed participants and reiterated SDC's long-standing commitment to sustainable development and climate resilience in Bangladesh, highlighting its 50-year engagement in the country and noting the Embassy's participation as a reflection of continued support. She reflected on the achievements of SoLAR Phase I, including the promotion of low-carbon agriculture through solar irrigation, reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and the successful piloting of grid integration for solar irrigation pumps. She emphasized that Phase I contributed significantly to enhancing irrigation reliability, strengthening farmer resilience, and improving food security. Divya also underscored the role of solar irrigation in addressing groundwater sustainability challenges and promoting gender inclusion within agricultural systems.

Overview and Outcomes of SoLAR Phase I

Dr. Darshini Ravindranath, Project Lead – SoLAR, and Senior researcher at IWMI provided an overview of Phase I (2019–2024), which was implemented across India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. She outlined the project's core goals—promoting solar irrigation as a replacement for diesel systems, developing innovative financing mechanisms, and integrating gender and social inclusion (GESI) throughout all components. She highlighted key achievements, including extensive research and pilot interventions across South Asia, with a strong focus in Bangladesh on innovative finance models and grid-connected solar irrigation pumps in collaboration with IDCOL. The project generated valuable evidence to inform policy and scaling efforts, while groundwater studies showed no significant depletion trends associated with solar irrigation. Partnerships with government agencies and development organizations were strengthened, and the initiative contributed to enhanced south–south cooperation, with lessons shared with countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Bhutan.

SoLAR Phase II Activities and Outcomes (2025–2028)

Dr. Jayanta Bhattacharya presented the implementation plan for SoLAR Phase II, outlining how the program will build on the successes and learnings from Phase I to drive large-scale, sustainable adoption of solar irrigation across South Asia.

Key outcome areas:

Evidence-based policy design

Phase II will deepen research on the impacts of solar irrigation on water use, livelihoods, gender inclusion, and climate resilience. This evidence base will be used to support governments in formulating policies that enable responsible expansion of solar irrigation—particularly through groundwater governance, incentives, and robust monitoring systems.

Accelerating finance for solar irrigation

A major focus will be on developing and operationalizing innovative financing mechanisms that make solar irrigation accessible to small and marginal farmers. This includes blended finance, pay-as-you-go models, community-owned systems, and partnerships with financial institutions to reduce upfront costs and enable equitable adoption.

Capacity building and institutional strengthening

The program will invest in strengthening the capacities of government departments, financial institutions, private sector partners, and community organizations. This involves training, knowledge-sharing platforms, and developing institutional frameworks to support long-term sustainability and effective service delivery.

Scaling SoLAR through Living Labs

Living Labs will serve as real-world learning and demonstration spaces where researchers, communities, and practitioners co-design, test, and refine solar irrigation solutions. These sites will help generate actionable insights on technological performance, social inclusion, governance challenges, and business models, creating pathways for broader scaling across diverse contexts.

Dr. Bhattacharya emphasized that Phase II is designed to move from pilots to scalable, socially inclusive, and climate-resilient solar irrigation systems.

Technical Presentation: Solar Suitability Mapping and Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Index

Dr. Mohammad Faiz Alam, Regional researcher at IWMI presented key findings from the solar suitability mapping and the Water–Energy–Food (WEF) Index, highlighting regional variations in the performance and adaptation outcomes of solar irrigation models. He explained that Phase II adopts a WEF nexus perspective to better understand how solar irrigation influences water use, agricultural productivity, and energy efficiency across different contexts. Spatial mapping results demonstrated how solar irrigation contributes to improved water efficiency and enhanced food security, offering a powerful tool for identifying priority areas for intervention. Dr. Faiz noted that the WEF-based analytical approach enables more informed, targeted investments and supports evidence-driven policy decisions for scaling sustainable solar irrigation.

Remarks from Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Mr. Marc Dietrich, Program Manager from Swiss Embassy in Dhaka congratulated IWMI and its partners on the launch of SoLAR Phase II and reaffirmed the importance of solar irrigation in reducing climate vulnerability and advancing sustainable development. They highlighted the regional value of the SoLAR initiative, underscoring its role in promoting renewable energy solutions that strengthen climate-resilient agriculture. The representatives also emphasized the need for deeper integration of energy, water, and agricultural systems to ensure long-term sustainability and equitable benefits for farming communities.

Panel Discussion: Solarising Agriculture in Bangladesh – Opportunities and Challenges

Panelists:

- Dr. Ashraful Alam, Joint Secretary, SREDA
- Md. Abdullah Al Matin, Senior Assistant Vice President, IDCOL
- Mr. Mohammad Sarwar Hossain, Additional Chief Engineer, BADC
- Mr. Ashok Kumar Biswas, Deputy Project Director (SIP), DAE
- Ms. Tanuja Bhattacharjee, Senior Energy Specialist, World Bank

Experts from IDCOL, SREDA, BADC, DAE, and the World Bank deliberate on pathways for sustainable solar energy adoption during the panel session moderated by Dr. Alok Sikka. *(photo: Ether Communications for IWMI)*

During the panel discussion moderated by Alok Sikka, **Dr. Ashraful Alam**, Joint Secretary at SREDA, highlighted the government's strong commitment to transitioning all irrigation pumps to solar energy. He emphasized the importance of diversifying the use of solar irrigation pumps (SIPs) beyond irrigation to maximize their utility and benefits. Dr. Alam also stressed the need for viable, sustainable business models and called for improved coordination with district administrations to ensure effective implementation and long-term success.

Mr. Mohammad Sarwar Hossain, Additional Chief Engineer at BADC, noted that paddy continues to be the major consumer of irrigation water, making water management reforms essential. He highlighted the persistent challenges in implementing Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) practices at scale. Mr. Hossain shared BADC's target of expanding solar irrigation to 6,000 systems and emphasized the need to integrate AWD, grid-connected solar irrigation, and efficient water management strategies to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Md. Abdullah Al Matin, Senior Assistant Vice President at IDCOL, emphasized that solar suitability mapping is essential for effectively scaling solar irrigation across Bangladesh. He noted the strong potential of agrivoltaics and shared that several pilot initiatives are already underway to explore its benefits for both energy generation and crop production. He also stressed the importance of developing integrated datasets for the sector and called for the designation of a dedicated custodian agency to manage and standardize data for informed planning and investment.

Ms. Tanuja Bhattacharjee, Senior Energy Specialist at the World Bank, underscored the importance of promoting private ownership models to strengthen the long-term viability of solar irrigation. She highlighted the need for greater clarity on whether solar irrigation is being approached primarily from an energy, livelihood, or ecosystem perspective, as these framing influences policy and program design. Ms. Bhattacharjee identified AWD as a viable ecological solution and emphasized that solar irrigation pumps should not only support irrigation needs but also contribute to income generation and broader transformation within the irrigation sector.

Mr. Ashok Kumar Biswas, Deputy Project Director (SIP) at DAE, observed that earlier attempts to implement AWD fell short due to operational challenges and gaps in on-ground execution. He suggested that bundling AWD with solar irrigation pumps could enhance both adoption and sustainability, creating a more robust and integrated approach to water-efficient farming.

Participants from IRRI, BARC, and others raised questions about policy coherence, technical integration, and financing. Responses were provided by Dr. Alok Sikka and Dr. Faiz Alam. Dr. Sikka thanked the panellists and participants, emphasizing the importance of strong collaboration among institutions to drive the expansion of solar irrigation. He highlighted the need for scalable business models and better policy alignment to ensure long-term sustainability. He also underscored the value of building on the insights and evidence generated during Phase I to enhance the impact and effectiveness of Phase II efforts.

Dr. Nazmun Nahar Karim (BARC) highlighting the role of solar irrigation and AWD bundling in achieving Bangladesh's NDC 3.0 climate targets during the workshop. *(photo: Ether Communications for IWMI)*

Special Remarks

Dr. Nazmun Nahar Karim, Executive Chairman, BARC expressed her appreciation for the efforts of SDC and IWMI, noting their pivotal role in advancing sustainable irrigation solutions in Bangladesh. She emphasized the critical importance of irrigation mechanization in helping the country maintain and strengthen its rice self-sufficiency, especially as climate change continues to exert pressure on agricultural systems. Dr. Karim highlighted the dual nature of climate change both as a stressor on food production and as a driver of emissions through conventional irrigation practices underscoring the urgency of transitioning to carbon-neutral irrigation technologies. She referenced Bangladesh's NDC 3.0 commitment, which targets a 39.9% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and includes the installation of 45,000 solar irrigation pumps. To achieve these goals, she stressed the need to bundle AWD practices with solar irrigation, enhance groundwater monitoring, and strengthen policy mechanisms to ensure coherence, efficiency, and long-term sustainability across the irrigation sector.

Closing Session

Dr. Darshini Ravindranath thanked all participants, reaffirmed IWMI and SDC's commitment to socially inclusive and climate-resilient solar irrigation and called for continued collaboration to scale clean energy solutions for sustainable agriculture.

Lessons Learned

- **The Power of "Bundling":** A critical takeaway from Phase I and the panel discussions is that solar irrigation cannot scale in isolation. To be sustainable, it must be bundled with efficient water management practices such as Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) to prevent groundwater overextraction and maximize ecological benefits.

- **Diversification is Key to Viability:** Lessons from SREDA and the World Bank suggest that the long-term economic success of Solar Irrigation Pumps (SIPs) depends on multi-use models. Beyond irrigation, pumps should support grid integration, agrivoltaics, and other income-generating activities to improve the payback period for farmers.

- **Addressing Operational Gaps:** Previous attempts at scaling water-saving techniques like AWD faced execution gaps. Future interventions must prioritize on-ground operational support and clear policy framing—deciding whether the approach is primarily driven by energy, livelihood, or ecosystem goals.

- **Data as a Strategic Asset:** There is a recognized need for a dedicated custodian agency to standardize and manage solar irrigation data. Without integrated datasets, informed planning and large-scale investment remain challenging.

Recommendations

- Use the Phase II Living Labs to co-design and test incentive mechanisms for water saving. The insights gained from these sites should be translated into Policy Briefs that provide clear guidance on groundwater pricing and renewable energy incentives for the 2025–2028 period.

- Implement a nationwide capacity-building program for the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) and local administrations. This should include training on technical maintenance, groundwater governance, and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) to ensure that women and youth are not marginalized in the transition to high-tech irrigation.

- Accelerate grid-integration policies that allow farmers to sell surplus electricity back to the national grid. Furthermore, promote Agrivoltaics (growing crops under solar panels) and secondary uses such as husking, milling, or charging stations to maximize the return on investment.

- Scale the "bundling" of Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) with solar irrigation pumps (SIPs). Future SIP financing and subsidies should be linked to the adoption of AWD and the installation of groundwater monitoring systems.

Partnerships

SoLAR Phase II project represents a strategic evolution in Bangladesh's agricultural landscape, transitioning from localized pilots to a national scaling strategy.

Through strengthened partnerships with key national stakeholders such as SREDA, IDCOL and BADC, the project aims to bridge the gap between financial accessibility for smallholder farmers and the government's ambitious NDC 3.0 emission reduction targets. Ultimately, by bundling solar technology with water-saving practices like Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD), SoLAR Phase II seeks to foster a carbon-neutral irrigation sector that secures both food and energy for Bangladesh's future.

Annexure A. Workshop Agenda.

Time	Topic	Speaker
09:30 - 10:00	Registration	All participants
10:00 - 10:05	Introduction	**Dr. Jayanta Bhattacharya** SoLAR Country Lead-Bangladesh, IWMI
10:05 - 10:10	Welcome remarks and context setting	**Dr. Alok Sikka** Country Representative – India & Bangladesh/ Senior Fellow, IWMI
10:10 - 10:15	Opening remarks	**Ms. Divya Kashyap Sharma** (Online) SDC India
10:15 - 10:35	Overview and outcomes of SDC-SoLAR Phase I Presentation on activities and outcomes of SDC-SoLAR Phase II in Bangladesh	**Dr. Darshini Ravindranath** Project Lead, SoLAR and Research Group Leader – Climate Policies, Finance and Processes (CPFP), IWMI **Dr. Jayanta Bhattacharya** Associate Scientist - Solar Energy and Climate Resilience, Country Lead, IWMI Bangladesh
10:35 - 10:50	Brief presentation on solar suitability mapping and WEF index	**Dr. Mohammad Faiz Alam** Regional Researcher, Agricultural Water Management, IWMI
10:50 - 11:00	Q&A session	All participants
11:00 - 11:30	**Tea/Coffee Break and Group Photo**	
11:30 - 12:15	**Panel Discussion:** Solarising Agriculture in Bangladesh: Opportunities and Challenges Moderator: **Dr. Alok Sikka**	**Panellists:** ▪ **Dr. Ashraful Alam** Member (Joint Secretary) Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) ▪ **Mr. Mohammad Sarwar Hossain** Additional Chief Engineer, Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation ▪ **Md. Abdullah Al Matin** Senior Assistant Vice President, IDCOL ▪ **Tanuja Bhattacharjee** Sr. Energy Specialist, World Bank ▪ **Mr. Ashok Kumar Biswas** Agriculture Engineer and Focal Person, SIP, Department of Agricultural Extension

12:15 - 12:25	Q&A session	
12:25 - 12:35	Remarks from special guest	**Marc Dietrich,** Programme Manager Nexus, SDC, Dhaka
12:35 - 12:45	Remarks from chief guest	**Dr. Nazmun Nahar Karim,** Executive Chairman, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC)
12:45 - 13:00	Vote of Thanks	**Dr. Alok Sikka** IWMI
13:00 onwards	**Networking Lunch**	

Annexure B. List of Participants.

S. No	Title	First Name	Last Name	Designation	Organization	Gender
1	Dr	Nazmun Nahar	Karim	Executive Chairman	Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council	F
2	Dr	Ashraful	Alam	Member (Join Secretary)	Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority	M
3	Dr	Wais	Kabir	Ex. Executive Chairman	Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council	M
4	Dr	Humnath	Bhandari	Country Representative	International Rice Research Institute	M
5	Dr	Manoranjan	Kumar Mondal	International Consultant	International Rice Research Institute	M
6	Mr	Md. Sarwar	Hossain	Additional Chief Engineer	Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation	M
7	Mr	Md. Syful	Azam	Assistant Chief Engineer	Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation	M
8	Mr	Md. Nazirul	Islam	Assistant Chief Engineer	Barind Multipurpose Development Authority	M
9	Mr	Ashok Kumar	Biswas	Agriculture Engineer and Focal Person, SIP	Department of Agricultural Extension	M
10	Mr	Md. Sakil	Ibne Sayeed	Project Director, SIP	Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board	M
11	Mr	Mohammad Abdullah	Al Matin	Senior Assistant Vice President (Technical), Renewable Energy Projects	Infrastructure Development Company Limited	M
12	Ms	Tanuja	Bhattacharjee	Senior Energy Specialist	World Bank	F
13	Mr	Taif	Hossain	Program Manager	European Union	M
14	Mr	Shadman	Bin Zahir	Energy Advisor	GIZ	M
15	Mr	Marc	Dietrich	Programme Manager Nexus	Embassy of Switzerland	M
16	Ms	Syeda Zinia	Rashid	Programme Manager	Embassy of Switzerland	F
17	Dr	Abul Fatta	Md. Tariqul Islam	Chief Scientific Officer	Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council	M
18	Ms	Mafruda	Rahman	Country Strategy Manage	WaterAid	F
19	Mr	Saiduzzaman	Pulak	Private Sector	Swiss contact	M

				Engagement Specialist		
20	Dr	Md. Mahbubul	Alam	Principal Scientific Officer	Bangladesh Rice Research Institute	M
21	Mr	Faisal	Rabbi	Energy Specialist	World Bank	M
22	Ms	Farhana	Afroz	Program Director	Helvetas BD	F
23	Mr	Tonmoy Kumar	Biswas	Officer (Monitoring and Evaluation)	NGO Forum for Public Health	M
24	Dr	Alok	Sikka	Country Representative (Indian and Bangladesh)	IWMI	M
25	Dr	Darshini	Ravindranath	Project Lead	IWMI	F
26	Ms	Shreya	Chakraborty	Regional Researcher	IWMI	F
27	Ms	Tripti	Agarwal	Project Coordinator	IWMI	F
28	Dr	Mohammad Faiz	Alam	Senior Regional Researcher	IWMI	M
29	Dr	Jayanta	Bhattacharya	Associate Scientist	IWMI	M
30	Mr	Partha Sankar	Saha	Journalist	Prothom Alo	M
31	Mr	Amit	Biswas	Assistant-Administrative Support	International Rice Research Institute	M
32	Ms	Divya Kashyap	Sharma	Deputy Head of International Cooperation Office (India)	SDC	F
33	Mr	Tanmoy	Bhaduri	Communications Specialist	IWMI	M

Annexure C. Media Coverage.

- **SoLAR Phase II launched: Solar-powered irrigation reduce costs by 30pc** https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/xnq9b9zeud
- **Public-private partnerships scale solar-powered agriculture in Bangladesh** https://www.iwmi.org/news/public-private-partnerships-scale-solar-powered-agriculture-in-bangladesh/

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Headquartered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, IWMI is a CGIAR Research Center with offices in 17 countries and a global network of scientists operating in more than 55 countries.

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