



**The SOAR Approach for
Supporting Participatory Protected Areas Management:
Elements and Experiences from a First Application in
Bangladesh**

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The SOAR Approach for Supporting Participatory Protected Areas Management: Elements and Experiences from a First Application in Bangladesh

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Nishorgo Support Project

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Introduction and Context

The Nishorgo Support Project (NSP) is a five-year effort to enhance Protected Area management of the Bangladesh Forest Department (FD), particularly through pilot testing of collaborative management approaches at five of the country's Protected Areas (see more details at www.nishorgo.org). The NSP began implementation with the FD in August of 2003, with initial efforts focused on building a common vision with the Forest Department of the goals and strategies improving PA management in the country. In late 2003 and into early 2004, detailed Field Appraisals (including secondary data review, then RRA and then PRA) were conducted at each site. By mid-2004, field implementing teams were taking up posts at all five sites, and beginning to work with local communities, particularly in the formation of groups for eventual economic and livelihood improvements.

In preparing field teams for implementation, NSP staff conducted a number of training and orientations sessions about PA co-management experiences around the world, the overall approach to PA management intended for the pilot sites, and related subjects. Project staff organized intensive courses at Dhaka level and regional level on these subjects.

Problem: Divergent Ideas About Site-level Strategies for Co-management

In the period January-February of 2005, the NSP team and colleagues at the FD began to recognize an increasingly strong divergence of view about how to proceed with co-management between the NSP field implementing NGOs, the NSP team in Dhaka and the FD itself. These differences became particularly clear in response to an urgent need to bring a halt to deforestation through organized logging organized logging cartels at the Lawachara National Park in the Sylhet Division. The FD expected that the Project would have more direct impact on stopping this illegal logging. In organizing a response to this specific and urgent need, it became increasingly clear to the NSP team that two broadly different approaches to co-management had developed within the team itself. The Dhaka NSP staff had been placing an emphasis on social mobilization and broad-scale dialogue with local participants so as to move toward local governing structures for co-management (FD has provided a green light to proceed with formation of Co-Management Council and Committee at each pilot PA). Field implementing teams of the NSP, which are led by two of the country's leading NGOs (RDRS and CODEC) had been placing a relatively greater emphasis on formation of small Groups that would be ultimate recipients of micro-finance, livelihood opportunities and self-governance.

The formation of Groups for the eventual receipt of micro-finance and other economic livelihood interventions is a standard and widely known and accepted model amongst NGOs in Bangladesh. Those Groups that were (and still are) being formed include principally women. Group size is roughly 10-15 persons. The Groups may receive a number of inputs, including such things as training in livestock, health, disaster, rights, nursery development. Groups are also supported in

empowerment activities. The Level of Effort (LOE) allocated by field staff to this target Groups is roughly 75% of field LOE, as per recent discussions with field staff. As members of the Dhaka NSP team recognized the level of LOE being allocated for formation of these Groups, as opposed to other targets, it was agreed that a joint effort should be undertaken between field staff and Dhaka staff to develop a refined strategy for each of the field sites.

Purpose of Site Strategy Refinement Sessions

Accordingly, the Project team organized a three day workshop on April 24-26, 2005 of all field staff (above Field Organizer level), along with all key Dhaka staff of the Project.

The stated purpose of the three-day workshop was to:

- Work together in a participatory manner to
- Refine and develop five site-specific strategies, including a
- Vision of our outcomes in 2008 at each site, that will lead us to a
- Blueprint and strategy for action over the coming year.

The most urgent purpose of the workshop was to develop outlines of these refined strategies for each site, so that our full NSP team could organize and implement activities in support of a commonly understood goal. A secondary purpose was to refine this participatory vision and objective setting exercise so that a similar process could be undertaken with our local priority stakeholders. It was (and is) assumed that this on-going dialogue with local PA stakeholders is essential to development of a true common vision amongst local stakeholders of how to proceed.

Definition of Terms for Use in the Sessions

During the workshop, we paid special attention to a number of key terms, as defined here. They are for discussion and refinement in the first stage of the Workshop.

- (1) Priority Stakeholders
- (2) Resources
- (3) Activities
- (4) Outcomes

Priority Stakeholders

We define ***priority stakeholders*** as those local stakeholders that have the strongest potential impact on the PA, and whose behavior, if changed, would make the strongest possible contribution to PA conservation.

We focus on "priority stakeholders" rather than the more general term "stakeholders" because this second term includes an almost endless number of groups. In our PRA/RRA and subsequent

studies we identified many stakeholder groups. This has been refined in subsequent studies. But we cannot work with all these groups, as we do not have the resources or capacity.

Rather, it is now time to identify that subset of priority stakeholders that have the largest possible impact on the long-term conservation of the PA.

These groups should not be so vague and loosely defined that they do not help us focus our work. Here are some examples of stakeholder definitions that we should not include:

- Low income women
- Woodcutters
- Children living around the PA
- Businesspersons

These terms are too vague to be of any real use. And what is more, our team does not have the resources to effect an outcome for all "poor women". Rather, we may consider defining our stakeholder groups more specifically, as follows:

- Low income women fully dependent on fuel wood from the PA from villages x, y and z on the northern side of the PA.
- Woodcutters hired by the Boro clan as day laborer
- Children participating in Scout Nature Clubs in schools a, b, c and d
- Businesspersons currently supplying briquettes and other energy supplies to the eastern side of the PA.

Resources

By resources, we mean all those assets or things we have to offer to support social change at our PAs. Examples of our resources may include the following, depending on the specific site:

- *The Forest Department:* It is commonly said at the field level that "If the Forest Department wants the illegal logging to stop tomorrow, it will.". Our colleagues at the FD may not have all the support they need, nor sometimes the right orientation for co-management, but they have enormous power and respect at the local level. They are our greatest and most important resource if we are to build support for co-management. We must work to strengthen their ability to facilitate a co-management exercise.
- *The Protected Area Itself:* This may sound odd, but we should never forget that we are in a sense offering local people their own Protected Area. That is the heart of this Nishorgo Program, that the FD is recognizing that it must reach out and share the PAs, not just the responsibility for them but the value of them to local people. We are making that available, and that is an enormous "asset" or resource.
- *Social Forestry Opportunities:* Our NSP Approach is grounded in the essential linkage between the social forestry activities that the FD can offer in the buffer and

the conservation of the core. Dr. Ram Sharma has made much progress in this regard with the strategy for Forestry Sector Project and NSP linkages in social forestry opportunities.

- *Supporting Laws and Legal Framework or, "Being in the Right":* We must not forget that the law and regulations are directly opposed to destruction of the PAs. We are supporting the law of the land, and this is a force in our favor. The law can work for us, and we should try to make it do so.
- *Local Environmentally-Interested Private Sector (e.g., Tour Operators):* There may be private sector operators in the area whose well-being depends on a conserved PA. Examples of these certainly include Tour Operators and hotel/restaurant owners. They already have a vested stake in the PA, and are in this sense an important resource.
- *Knowledge of Technologies:* Many of our stakeholders do not have ready access to knowledge of different and perhaps improved technologies for living or production. We have seen at Chunati and Teknaf how few women have used improved efficiency stoves or are aware of their details. The same may be true for rice production, goat fattening, and other technologies.
- *Co-Management Council and Committee:* The FD and the Steering Committee have approved these two governing bodies. This is an enormous opportunity to allow people to express their desires, hopes and needs relating to the PA in an accepted forum. The mere fact that this Committee/Council structure has been supported for national assets such as the PAs should be considered an enormous asset working in our favor.
- *Other Projects of Government or NGOs:* As a Government-sponsored Project, we should pay special attention to the resources existent in already-ongoing programs and projects of the Government and NGOs. With appropriate dialogue, some of these resources may be re-focused to support our co-management efforts at the PA level.
- *Access to People of Power and to Information Networks:* We cannot forget that we as a national project have enormous potential to reach up to Dhaka or to regional people of power if we need a problem resolved. We can also help people get answers to questions about which they may not be aware. This too is an important resource.
- *Communication via Newspapers, Radio and TV:* Journalists are constantly looking for interesting information to communicate. This is an important resource open to us.
- *Existing Community Associations:* Within the local stakeholder communities, there are certainly associations of people, many of whom may be interested in conservation.

- *Youth Associations and School Groups:* We are already working in close association with the Bangladesh Scouts, and will continue to do so. Other youth groups can be involved also, as the young people are often very keen and happy to be involved in nature and nature outings. Their energy and vigor should be considered an important potential support of our goals.
- *Our NSP site staff:* Includes Site Facilitator and Field Organizer and support staff: Our NSP people are our principal and most important resource. The SF and FO are on the "front lines" of this challenge, and thus are the "face" of the NSP to the local social groups.
- *Capital:* Often, we think of micro-finance as the first and most important "resource" we have to offer. But we may do better to think of it as the last resort, after other avenues have been exhausted. It is always easy to get people involved if you give them money to do so. But can we get them involved before we offer micro-finance?

Activities

By activities we refer to the actual processes that we as a Project can support to bring our resources to bear on our priority stakeholders. What do we actually do? This brings us to our activities. Activities may include such things as:

- *Organization for Empowerment:* Generally, many of our stakeholders may lack a sense of their own power. This is one of the defining characteristics of poverty, and both CODEC and RDRS explicitly recognize the need for "empowerment" in their structural makeup. When we help organize our people for empowerment, we make them aware that when they come together, they can take control to a greater extent of their own destinies, their own livelihoods, and their own futures. One of the ways in which empowerment can be manifested is in an increased feeling of control over the PA itself, and that is precisely the outlet provided by the PA Council and Committee. As an activity, we can work with our stakeholders to give them a greater voice in their future in the local area.
- *Dissemination of Production Technologies:* We believe that there are production technologies that may be of use to some priority stakeholders even without access to micro-finance. This may be the case for improved fuel wood stoves or certain approaches to livestock production. This is one of our potential activities.
- *Broad Scale Awareness Raising Events:* We can do a number of activities to raise awareness of issues of direct concern to the PA. This might be through fairs, or scout events, or local mass media.
- *Legal Awareness and/or Education:* Adult legal education concerning rights and empowerment is an important tool as an activity for mobilizing local stakeholders. Materials are under development by a consortium of projects to help explain relevant

rights to adult groups. Our field organizers can use these materials in empowerment activities that will contribute to PA conservation.

- *Income Generation and Microfinance:* Establishing loan/savings programs can help as an activity in improving the livelihoods of local people, and that may contribute to PA conservation.
- *Helping to Gain Access to Information or People:* We as a project are well linked to information and power. As an activity, we can help our stakeholders reach out to solve problems related to lack of information or lack of power.
- *Others:* There are certainly other activities that can be identified.

Outcomes

By outcomes we mean the changed social state as a result of undertaking activities using our resources on priority stakeholders.

Here are some examples of what such a vision of social change might look like:

- Forest Guards are more visible in the community. Their status has been raised as a result of their transparent involvement in PA conservation.
- The 20 sawmills that exist in Srimongal have been reduced to only 10, and the certification process that their wood does not come from LNP is verified.
- District Government has taken visible efforts/activities that demonstrate its perception that the PA is an important economic potential contribution to the local region.

Outcomes can be set for different periods. In this exercise, we will set an initial group of outcomes for 2008, and then work out what our third year Project outcomes should be.

Assumptions and Constraints

A number of assumptions of issues that we must keep in mind.

Most importantly, what you do today in this workshop will not be final. This will be an evolving process. Just as you have refined your strategies at the regional level, so this process will continue that refinement. When you return to your sites, you will and should continue the process still further. You can continue to revise this brief strategy paper as you interact with participants and different stakeholders, and as you learn more and more about the social dynamics at each site.

We assume that users are familiar with and will incorporate issues raised at site level in the gender study. That study raised observations about different groups.

We assume that the participants will pay heed to observations in the recently completed alternative energy study completed by PSL.

We assume that participants will try and learn from case studies presented from other countries. These cases have much to offer. Co-management is not a new idea, and we can learn from elsewhere, even if our local context is unique.

Finally, we must remember that we have limited resources and limited time. If our goal is that we will effect change in a decade, that isn't acceptable. We must be able to explain what we will do in one year and by Project end, and how that relates to change that will occur after our Project is completed.

The Goal of Co-Management, and of this Workshop, Redefined

Now, let us define our goal for co-management under the NSP, and of this workshop, using these terms. What we hope to do under co-management may be stated as follows:

Apply our scarce NSP resources in the most efficient and low-cost manner on activities involving the priority stakeholders that can have the largest positive outcomes on our PA conservation.

What we must do in this Workshop, therefore, is to redefine our site-level approaches through a balanced matching of these issues: priority stakeholders, resources, activities and outcomes. Each of the site level strategies should be summarized in a single, short (i.e., 2 page) summary strategy.

These site level strategies should serve as a blueprint for upcoming work and discussions at each site. The blueprint strategy will and should be reviewed, discussed, and further refined. In particular, the key elements of it may be discussed with each of the key priority stakeholder groups, so that they can give their own opinion and ideas of how to succeed in conserving the PA.

Some Guidelines when Matching Priority Stakeholders to Resources and Activities

Be careful that your resources and your activities can actually be achieved with the selected priority stakeholder. You may think that "all poor women around a PA" is a key stakeholder group, but we do not have resources (probably) to affect this entire stakeholder's behavior in the time frame of the Project. Rather, you should focus on those Activities and Resources that can

actually be engineered by the Project itself, and are thus within our manageable interest. In short, the approach you select must meet be able to answer the following questions positively:

- Is the strategy realistic? Can it be achieved by with our own resources, plus that which we can realistically leverage in the next two years?
- Have we set incremental and recognizable steps toward achieving our Vision, including the Outcomes noted there? What we do in this next year of NSP should contribute to what we do in years four and five. There must be a logical flow and plausible causal link.
- Are there other resources or Activities that need to happen, outside your own control, that are necessary to the achievement of your expected Outcomes?

The Workshop Process Explained Using this Schematic Approach

Now, with these guidelines and tools, the process should be undertaken like this:

Stage One: Break Into Mixed Groups

For each site, the working groups should include:

- At least one person that works at that site
- At least one person from another region (i.e., 1 from south should sit at north site, and one from north should sit at south site)
- At least one person, if possible, from non-implementing team (i.e., Dhaka team or Dhrubo)

Each site's working group is to be assigned a working area that they will use during breakout sessions over the three days.

Appropriate materials are to be made available.

Stage Two: Priority Stakeholder Identification

Next, we will work to identify your priority stakeholder groups. Each priority stakeholder group should be identified on a blue card, with as much detail as is reasonable. A maximum of five priority stakeholder groups may be identified per site.

Stage Three: Social Change Outcomes by 2008

The purpose of this stage is to think about and clarify what social and institutional outcomes should be achieved by 2008 (i.e., end of the NSP) at each site. Presumably, some of these key social outcomes will include the priority stakeholders that you have identified in Stage Two. But there may be others.

You should restrict yourself to social change rather than PA conservation/biodiversity changes, since it is assumed that those changes should result.

So, what changes do you expect to see in the social setting in/around your site?

Here are some examples of what such a vision of social change might look like:

- Forest Guards are more visible in the community. Their status has been raised as a result of their transparent involvement in PA conservation.
- The 20 sawmills that exist in Srimongal have been reduced to only 10, and the certification process that their wood does not come from LNP is verified.
- District Government has taken visible efforts/activities that demonstrate its perception that the PA is an important economic potential contribution to the local region.

Stage Four: Resources and Activities

At each site, the resources you have available to you, and the activities that you may do with those resources, may differ. It is thus important that you think carefully in your working groups about what you have to work with (resources) and what you can actually do with them (activities).

After discussion, you should identify your resources on one set of cards and your proposed priority activities on another set of cards.

Do not write any more than ten resources and ten activities that you are likely to use. (?)

Stage Five: Putting it Together into a Short Term Strategy and Plan

Now, your three year Vision is set, your resources are identified and your likely activities are also identified. So, how will you put them all together? That is the purpose of this penultimate stage.

Remember, at this stage, you are working out your strategy and plan only for the coming year. So you should be realistic about what you can actually achieve.

First, post all your priority stakeholders, your resources and your activities and your Vision outcomes on the wall. Now, for each priority stakeholder, try and think of the approach for achieving social change.

This is not an easy or simple process. It cannot be fit into lines and cards and paper. But by using the cards and targets, it should help to focus your discussion on what is actually realizable. After placing the full set of cards on the board, try and walk through each major stakeholder group and think of what you will do (activities using resources) to affect change in their behavior.

The output of this process are to be prepared in a 2-3 page write up following this basic format

1. Vision of Protected Area in 2008 – Main Outcomes
2. Resources
3. Priority Stakeholders
4. Activities (organized by Project categories as follows)
 - Project Objective 1: Co-management
 - Project Objective 2: Alternative Income Generation & Ecosystem Management
 - Project Objective 3: Policy Development and Constituency Building
 - Project Objective 4: Capacity Building and Institutionalization
 - Cross cutting Project Activities

This fifth stage output is to be prepared in rough outline form on the afternoon of the second day and presented verbally on the morning of the third day. Revisions are then made on the third day, working in teams.

Stage Six: Presentations, Discussions and Refinement

In this final stage, each group will circulate their strategies and then present them. They will be discussed and refined by the full workshop group. These refined strategies can then be used by Dhaka and field staff to assist in communicating our goals.

Stage Seven: Now, Go Back to the Field Partners

The first six stages of the SOAR process are undertaken for the NSP team to refine site strategies for all of our sites. With these stages of refinement completed, the team members are to return to the field to enter into a similar participatory dialogue process with local priority stakeholder groups. Processes are in development to support field level staff in implementing this approach with a wide variety of stakeholder groups, starting with the local Forest Department staff and our own Field Organizers at village level.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Our team was faced with a simple problem: our field implementing teams had a fixed and determined vision of how to proceed doing co-management, while others amongst the team had a much different vision. It was essential, before we could make concerted efforts to engage local stakeholders, that we have a common vision amongst the team itself. To that end, we needed a simple means of stimulating a process of site strategy development for each of our sites for co-management. Since the co-management effort is neither simple nor universally applicable, this meant that we needed a schematic approach to discussing co-management that would be comprehensible to the local NGO staff while still retaining the necessary sophistication required to capture the social mobilization dimensions of it.

In the end, we have settled upon use of this so-called SOAR approach, standing for Stakeholders, Outcomes, Activities and Resources. This admittedly simplified format allows participants to work through these four basic components.

Our team has found that the SOAR process has been useful as a means to developing a common vision amongst our Project staff about how to proceed with co-management at each of the pilot PAs.

As is suggested in the revised site strategies that emerged from the process, our strategies have now gone beyond the Group formation focus being adhered to earlier to include a broader social mobilization approach. Each site is different, however, based on the specific characteristics of that site.

It was agreed during the work shop that the Project will proceed immediately to undertaking this process with FD and our local Field Organizers jointly. The local FD staff, especially the Forest Guards, Beat Officers and Range Officers, are the face and presence of the FD in all these Protected Areas. We must and will engage them in this participatory strategy setting process even before we do it with other stakeholders. And we intend to do so jointly with our own Field Organizers, so that the rapport between these two key groups can be deepened.

Finally, this is not the first "process" for participatory objective setting, nor is it the last. We found, however, that it was well adapted to the specific needs for developing strategies for broad scale mobilization of local citizens.