

10 learning from Nishorgo project: from the eyes of a field activist

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Bangladesh is one of the highly dense countries in the world with approximately 950 people living in per square kilometer land. Bangladesh is also rated as one of the poorest countries. Although, it is over populated poor country, it has fabulous scenic beauty. Sundarban, which is declared as part of the world heritage is situated here. About 710 km. coast line along the Bay of Bengal, the rivers Padma, Meghna, Brahmaputra and so many, hills with green forest in Chittagong Hill Tract has superbly fashioned country's landscape, different flora and fauna generates a rich biodiversity of the country. For its good soil and weather the condition is ideal for agriculture and fish in the water bodies.

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics notes that total forestland is about 2.25 million hectare, which is 14% of the total land area. Statistics from other sources shows that forest vegetation is only 6% of the total area. However, quantity of forest vegetation is might be more or less but virtually it is alarmingly disappearing. It is also noted that from 1970, country's forest is disappeared more than 50% and the rate of degradation is very fast.

There are many causes for declining forest vegetation like over population, illegal felling, huge fuel wood collection, land encroachment etc. But, forest protection not only for human being but also for the exigency of the universe.

During the period Bangladesh Government initiates different steps for protecting forest degradation and since 1981 through community forestry project Government initiated several activities to protect and conserve forest resources. Upazila Afforestation and Nursery Development Project (1989-1996), Coastal Greenbelt Project (1995-2002), The Forestry Sector Project (1998-2004), Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project (1996-2006) are the examples of such initiatives.

Besides, to conserve the biodiversity through protecting forest and prevent country from environmental catastrophe the Government has established 16 protected areas all over the country under Wild Life (Preservation) Order 1973. According to the law any extraction of forest product is illegal and punishable.

Being experienced, GoB also came to an understanding that only law without people's participation cannot achieve expected outcome. Particularly, as forest management is much complex than any other resources for its visible economic value, community involvement in management system is essential, as the space of degradation tremendously accelerated further. It is essential of protecting the environment and rights of indigenous peoples and other forest dependent communities.

In the year 2003, GoB initiated a program for biodiversity conservation called 'Co management of Tropical Forest Resources in Bangladesh'. Subsequently, US Government came forward to assist the initiative. With an agreement with US AID, GoB started the project targeting five pilot protected area among 16. Later on the project is named as 'Nishorgo'. International Resource Group (IRG) along with three national NGO (CODEC, RDRS, and NACOM) on track for implementing the program.

As I worked with the program about one and half year in grass root implementation level, I have experienced about and got access of 10 learning from the project. These are:

1. Illegal felling is the major cause for degradation NOT fuel wood collection for household consumption

Large number of people has been living inside and adjacent to the forests. People needs fuel wood for their daily consumption. It is known to all that different types of fuel is very unlikely available in the country particularly forest rural areas. That's why people have to depend on forest fuel wood for their household consumption. Hence, it is assumed that fuel wood consumption might be the major cause for forest destruction and deforestation. While, talking with the people at the villages adjacent to the protected areas and also with other stakeholders, it is realized that not the poor but illegal fellers are destroying the forests faster, for the economic value of big trees. And it is severely hampering wildlife, serious disturbance to ecology and further impoverishment of local people.

2. Influential and power - linked people are responsible NOT the poor

At the beginning, we assumed that poor and landless people mainly responsible for degradation. Because, for their livelihood they might go to the forest for fuel wood collection in the day time and illegal felling in the night. But it is understood that the people, who are involved with the illegal felling, employ the poor for the task. Besides, illegal feller is linked with the bad and powerful politicians who can influence the local administration. Hence, stopping illegal felling is very challenging than any other task.

3. NO diversified job opportunity is factor to push the poor for forest destruction

People living around the forests are mostly dependent on forest product for their livelihood. As they don't have much job options, they have to go to the forest for collecting different forest products. In these days of ours, due to forest degradation, poor are more or less jobless and their livelihood is threatened. Influential people who are involved with illegal felling availing the opportunity of the situation and convince the poor people to be involved with the illegal act of tree feeling.

4. People own the forest NOT Forest Development

Community perceived Government owns the forest and Forest Department is the caretaker. This understanding prevails with almost all the people living around the forest. Hence, they don't feel to protect and conserve the forest resources. It is important to transfer the ownership to the community and that is the key measure for the forest protection.

5. Mass awareness is ESSENTIAL for protection

While discussing the community, it is exposed that people don't have any idea about the protected area and what does it mean. People are not conscious about the effect of the forest degradation. Eventually, they are not alert of biodiversity management. It needs to massive national campaign to aware the people of the country. Obviously, the prime task

is to make sensitive and responsive those people who are living inside and adjacent to the forest.

6. **Community access ENSURE in information**

Community is basically out of sight about what is going on for forest management and what sorts' of initiatives are undertaken for biodiversity conservation. As they don't have any access to the information community confuse regarding the initiatives. As a consequence, they are not keen to participate with the conservation initiatives. In this context people have the right to know the information and that is also one of the key for active participation.

7. **Community participation ENSURE in management**

Though some proposals emphasized on community participation in the management system, but practice is denying the reality. All stakeholders including Forest Department agreed that without community participation management is insignificant, challenging and complex also.

8. **LINKS with other forest conservation activities**

Government initiates different programs for biodiversity conservation and different departments engage for implementing. Need to link those programs each other and integrate them in a chain. Biodiversity conservation is holistic rather sector approach. It includes livelihood, plantation, education and even housing also. So holistic approach is key to achieve the goal.

9. **People is in the center NOT Forest Department or implementing agencies**

Although, respective department and NGOs are working for implementation of different initiatives, but it should be kept in mind that people's participation, people's contributions are indispensable to reach the goal. If respective Departments or the other implementing agencies take the lead not the community at the end, the whole efforts will be vain.

10. **Forest not for forest, FOR people's tranquility**

Few perceptions forests are prohibited area and that is for the various animals and birds. But our old testimony proves that forests are for the happiness and peace also. Hundreds of years ago in Indian Subcontinent, for pristine purity, self-realization and perfection priests spent their times in forests. And as it is the era of modernization and mechanization, people obviously need to stay at least few moments in a place for peace and serenity and that might be the forests.

Eventually, my learning from the people of adjacent and inside the forests, we must put our conscious effort to save our forests for the future generations and the universe.

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