3

Genesis of the Nishorgo Forest Co-Management Experiment

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief review of the origins of the Nishorgo co-management project, prior to its formulation as a specific project. The conceptual origins are reviewed, as is the process of dialogue between USAID and the Government of Bangladesh.

Co-Management: From Open Waters to Forests

The seeds of USAID support for forest co-management under Nishorgo were planted at the time of the Flood Action Plan process in the early 1990s, a process supported also by USAID. Analyses done in support of that process highlighted the value of capture fisheries that had been neglected in the past, identified shortcomings in the management of open waters, noted that traditional community institutions related to management of open waters had gradually been eroded, and that biodiversity and productivity of freshwater wetlands had declined as wetlands were drained and water flows had been interrupted and redirected by construction of embankments (Ali 1997; Halls 1998; Sultana and Thompson 1997). The most notable feature of fishery and wetland management at that time was the absence of management concern for fisheries and wetlands, the government had divided public wetlands into thousands of waterbodies or "jalmohals" in each of which the fishing rights were leased out by the Ministry of Land to the highest bidder (there being no direct role for the government's specialist agencies for fisheries or environment in this process).

Although community-based fisheries had been tested in several individual waterbodies, including ox-bow lakes, beels and parts of rivers, in the mid-1990s, the larger open water systems presented unique obstacles to applying the same community based approach. The fishers traditionally using open water fisheries in Bangladesh were principally from the minority Hindu community, and were also the poorest members of the broader society in those areas. These poor and minority groups had little capacity to challenge those more powerful sections of society that could afford to lease waterbodies and who were encroaching on open waters for agriculture and aquaculture. Without some sort of formalized recognition and alliance with the public sector, these communities would have little possibility of continuing their open water fisheries practices nor of slowing the loss of wetlands that would exacerbate floods.

One specific open water pilot experiment in Tangail – undertaken and supported by the NGO Center for Natural Resources Studies (CNRS) – was instrumental in testing a new and different way of managing open waters. CNRS was able in that pilot effort to show that natural fishery productivity could recover when silted up channels between floodplain wetlands and main rivers are re-excavated (Rahman *et al*. 1999). In other waterbodies NGOs had also worked to help minority fishers to organize to manage fisheries with support from the Department of Fisheries, but access had only been assured for the fishers for three years (Thompson *et al.* 2003).

USAID's MACH project had demonstrated the viability of wetland co-management before Nishorgo began. [Sirajul Hossain]

Building on these pilots in open water fisheries management, USAID financed from 1998 onwards the Management of Aquatic ecosystems through Community Husbandry (MACH which means fish in Bangla). Implemented by Winrock International working with CNRS, Caritas and Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, in collaboration with the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, MACH successfully tested and developed a model for wetland co-management.

While this started with helping local wetland users organize so they could then restore waterbody productivity, on its own this would not be enough in large wetland systems. A variety of options were considered for joining and strengthening fishing communities through alliances with the public sector. Linking user organizations with the Department of Fisheries at Upazila (sub-district) level was not sufficient on its own as wetlands come under the land administration headed at this level by the Upazila Nirbani Officer (UNO), the chief administrative officer, who has a key role in the granting of waterbody leases. By 2002, a tripartite structure had developed for fisheries co-management, and in the later stages of the MACH project attempts were made to have this mainstreamed more widely. Among poor wetland users, mostly fishers, federations of Resource User Groups were established largely to support livelihood diversification. To manage specific wetland areas, including holding leases to waterbodies reserved for them for 10 years, Resource Management Organizations were formalized comprising not only of RUG members but also representatives of user villages (farmers, landless, women and local leaders). To coordinate management over larger wetland systems, balance power, and resolve conflicts Local Government Committees (later formalized as collaborative management bodies named Upazila Fisheries Committees) were formed comprising of sub-district officials, local council (Union Parishad) chairmen, and the presidents of the Resource Management

Organizations and federations of Resource User Groups (see Halder and Thompson 2006; WRI 2008 chapter 3).

With an increased interest in conserving biodiversity while also contributing to livelihood improvements, USAID considered application and adaptation of this fisheries co-management approach to the forest sector. On public forest lands at that time, the Forest Department had been expanding social forestry, a model that gave individuals rights on small parcels of Reserve Forest land to new plantations of exotic tree species. Social forestry was participatory, but in a very narrow sense, and with management of the process entirely in the hands of the Forest Department, with the recipients being selected and directed by the Department.

By 2003, social forestry agreements allowed for participation by the public in forest management, although by individuals interacting directly with the FD. Here, FD staff give payment of social forestry benefits. [Forest Department]

So social forestry, while participatory in this sense, did not provide a parallel to the co-management and collective action that had been introduced in the wetlands. Indeed, the narrow interpretation of the Forest Act 1927 prohibited any community involvement within the Reserve Forest lands anywhere in the country. In light of USAID's interest in supporting biodiversity conservation, and the restrictive options for participatory management in Reserve Forest lands, attention turned instead to those "double protected" lands within the Protected Area network covered under the Wildlife Act of 1974.

These lands were ostensibly allocated for the conservation of biodiversity, but it was widely recognized even at the Forest Department that the National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and Game Reserve of the PA network were in extremely poor condition, with rampant illegal logging, the lack of any management interventions and minimal resource allocation from the Forest Department budget. Also, the forest PA network was extremely small as a proportion of total surface area of the country (only 1.4% in 2002 compared to 5% in India and nearly 10% in Sri Lanka).

At the same time, USAID recognized that Government of Bangladesh policy documents had set ambitious goals for biodiversity conservation and participation on forest lands. The Forestry Sector Master Plan of 1994 in particular had called for an increase in biodiversity protected areas to 10% of all forest lands, and called also for participation of local communities in that process. However, little if any progress had been made toward these policy goals, and USAID assumed that the Forest Department (FD) would be open to consider approaches for improved effectiveness in these conservation areas.

In light of the deteriorating biodiversity resources despite ambitious conservation goals, USAID calculated that the Forest Department might be willing to try new approaches, including a form of collaborative management.

Concept Proposal and Development

Based on this logic, USAID undertook initial project design and feasibility efforts in April-May 2002, engaging the FD in an exploration of participatory models for protected areas.

With very few exceptions, the Department was strongly opposed to the idea of co-management of PA lands. Reference was made to the Wildlife Act 1974, and the fact that the Act did not allow for any involvement of communities in the management of PA lands. As a corollary to this, FD staff noted that any new permission to "allow people into" the PA lands under the Act would only contribute to the loss of biodiversity in them. Rather, the Department argued, the PA lands should be more forcefully protected by equipping the Department with the staff and equipment to ensure that protection.

But apart from these references to legal grounds, the driving reason the Forest Department objected initially to co-management was resistance to the central idea of allowing citizens to have a say and role in decision-making on any forest lands. Social forestry was considered participation, and anything beyond that level of participation was not considered welcome or necessary.

Additional arguments emerged about the intentions of the US Government in supporting the project idea at all. The assumption behind these objections was that the US Government would press to take the PA lands away from the FD and give them to the ethnic minority communities living inside or next to many PAs around the country. At two PAs, demonstrations were actually organized by local FD staff members, with local Bengali citizens demonstrating against the project on these grounds.

Acceptance of the Nishorgo Support Project by the Forest Department, and by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, was due in the end to a very small number of strong and forceful personalities. After initial very negative objections by the FD, the then Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests took a strong stand in favor of testing co-management as a pilot. He refused, however, to make a unilateral decision to approve the project feasibility and the bilateral agreement in which it was included, but instead invited the full senior staff of the Forest Department to a discussion of the co-management concept at the Ministry.

Ten senior members of the Forest Department attended that critical discussion in 2002, with the meeting chaired by the Secretary, of which only two spoke out strongly in favor of testing the co-management concept. These two argued that the PAs under the Wildlife Act were so rapidly disappearing that something creative and different needed to be done, and that the Department would need to find a way to engage communities in a more comprehensive way than under social forestry. One of them argued that the FD had learned much from the success of social forestry, and should break new ground by expanding the participatory concept to the

management of PA lands. The then Chief Conservator of Forests also provided critical support in that meeting, and in light of these few strong voices and interest from the Secretary, the project design was approved and the process of selecting partners to work with the Department commenced.

Lessons Learned

This early process of design of support for co-management of PAs in Bangladesh generates three lessons:

The need for champions: Most notably, at least a small number of champions within the system (administration) need to support a new approach, particularly when it challenges the status quo. Those champions were few but held influential positions in the Ministry and Forest Department.

A compelling and field-tested approach: There needs to be a clear and compelling technical approach to be tested. The clarity of the co-management approach was not only tested in other countries, but it had been tested in visible and recognized community based co-management of wetlands in Bangladesh, and so provided a point of reference for the "new" application to the forest sector.

Critical condition of the environment and general acceptance that drastic measures were required: It was critically important that the current biodiversity and management status of the PAs be so bad. Nobody in the FD could rationally argue that their current approach to PA management was working, and that made it more difficult to reject a new approach out of hand.

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