



MACH (Management of Aquatic Ecosystems through Community Husbandry) is a Government of Bangladesh project supported by USAID. The project partners (Winrock International, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, Center for Natural Resources Studies, and Caritas Bangladesh) have worked closely with the Department of Fisheries since 1998. The aim was to establish community based co-management and restore and increase sustainable productivity at the ecosystem level in three large wetlands: Hail Haor in Sreemongal, Turag-Bangshi river and wetlands in Kaliakoir and the Kangsha-Malijhee basin in Sherpur. In the wet season these wetlands cover about 32,000 ha, and in the dry season they include over 100 distinct waterbodies. Over 110 villages inhabited by over 184,000 people are directly involved.

## Local Government Support to Communities in the Co-management of Wetland Resources in Bangladesh: The MACH Approach

MACH has been working since 1998 towards the sustainable management of three large wetlands by employing a three pronged approach: i) to introduce sustainable co-management arrangements that involve local people and local government; ii) building the capacity of those institutions; iii) providing support to improve the livelihoods of poor people dependent on these wetlands. By now several components of the approaches developed have been found to be effective. As a means of extending and sharing lessons learnt on these approaches and achievements MACH is producing a series of thematic policy briefs. This brief exclusively focuses on how MACH engaged local government to support local communities for management and restoration of wetland resources through a successful co-management arrangement in three of its project sites and provides recommendations about scaling up of this arrangement.

### BACKGROUND

Co-management is about sharing responsibilities between local resource users/communities and the government to manage any natural resource base. It commonly involves devolving a greater share of management responsibilities from government to empower local communities. MACH worked to enable this by creating institutional linkages between community organizations consisting of local resource users and the local administration, thereby promoting a system of co-management in wetland conservation and management.

During the design phase MACH engaged in stock taking and concluded that previously many fisheries management projects failed because the local community was not involved in their planning. As a reaction, community based management methods were tried by many projects, but these only involved the local poor fishers without any involvement of either local government or the local power structure. After the project finished the fisheries management system reverted back to the previous situation and local elites captured the resource for their own benefits.

MACH learned from these earlier examples. First, in forming the Resource Management Organizations (RMOs) it considered all users of a specific wetland area including the poor fishers, farmer and the elite living around the wetland. Second, it engaged local government bodies and elected members to strengthen and provide sustainable support to these local RMOs. In comparison to other projects experimenting with fisheries co-management, MACH has gone a step further by institutionalizing the co-management arrangement in the form of Local Government Committees (LGCs) that include local government officials, elected representatives and community based organization leaders to coordinate and guide the management process.



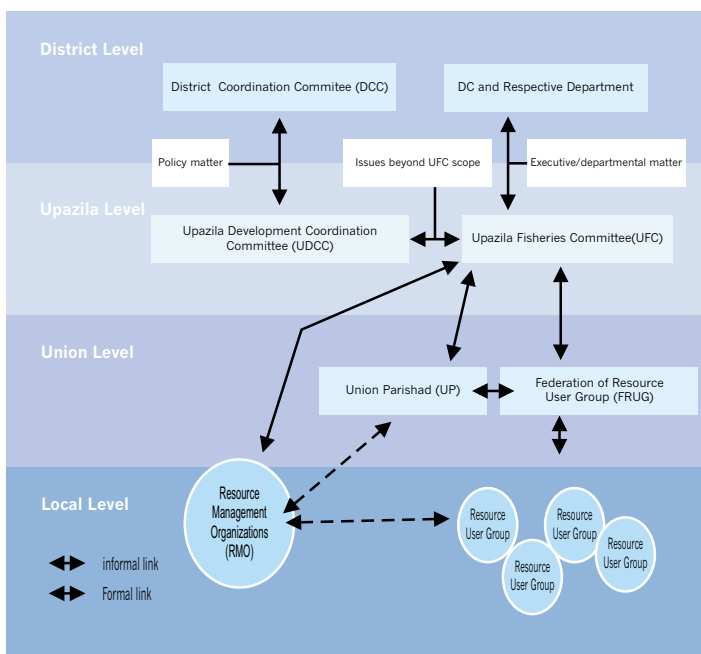
LGC Meeting

MACH APPROACH

**Formalizing the Co-management Arrangement**

Involving local government is essential to facilitate the community based organizations that seem to be effective in improving wetland management, and which has proved difficult for government agencies to achieve alone. Further, formalizing local government participation by forming Upazila level committees bringing together local government and community organization representatives has great potential for ensuring post-project sustainability.

- MACH established Local Government Committees (LGC) in each of the five Upazilas or sub-districts covered by the project. They are chaired by the Upazila Nirbahi Officer, the Upazila Fisheries Officer is Member-Secretary, and representatives of other relevant government departments at Upazila level, concerned Union Parishad Chairmen and the RMO and FRUG (Federation of Resource Users Group: the savings group through which training and micro-credit are channeled) representatives are members. They meet regularly to coordinate management over the whole wetland system in their area. The respective UP chairmen act as advisors to the RMOs and they have invited the RMOs to attend their council meetings to represent wetland interests in their areas. The government officials at the Upazila play a supportive role and one of over sight. They also are there to provide services in the various sectors (agriculture, fisheries, livestock, etc.) to those requiring technical support.
- In 2005 the long term composition, terms of reference and name of these committees were agreed with Department of Fisheries (DoF) and DoF recommended that this be approved by the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (MoFL). In the meantime MoFL has agreed that the LGCs will continue to function until such time as the Upazila Fisheries Committees (UFC) are formed and replace them.



Institutional Arrangement for Fisheries Co-management through MACH



RMO Planning Session

**Empowering Community Based Organizations**

The community organizations such as RMOs should be provided formal recognition and given support to develop before they can sit on LGCs or take on resource management responsibilities. This will empower them to negotiate and feel at par with local government officials and also access and demand technical support or services from local or national level officials.

- MACH has empowered 16 RMOs across three sites to help them become sustainable competent organizations. Initially, with the help of MACH guidance in making local management plans and adoption of best practices, the RMOs have acquired a better understanding in wetland management and habitat restoration. MACH tried to upgrade the competence of the RMOs in areas like organizational management, accounts keeping, leadership abilities, and awareness of legal rights through training, meetings, seminars, networking, and issue based negotiations/advocacy with local and national level (DoF and Department of Environment) officials.
- The RMOs are registered with the government under the Social Welfare Department with approved constitutions and annual budgets. They have secured access to certain water bodies for 10 years and 60% of RMO members represent poorer people who have been given opportunities for becoming self reliant through separate organizations (Resource Users Group - RUG) that provide skill training and credit.
- As an approach to empower the community based organizations, MACH identified and involved local influentials or opinion leaders and local representative that are less exploitative and can champion the cause of the poor in RMOs.

## Issues of Sustainability

Setting aside some funds for use after the project to support the operation of the LGC and programs to improve the resource base would enhance sustainability. Both co-management and any funding arrangement would need to be fully institutionalized through government orders if they are to continue after project completion, uninterrupted by changes in personnel at the local government level.

- As a part of its effort to establish sustainable management systems for long after it ends, MACH decided that an endowment fund should be left with the LGCs (which will continue in the long term as UFCs) where the principal could never be touched but the accrued interest could be used to carry on their functions including meetings, awareness raising, and restoring wetland habitats.
- Budgets equivalent to a year's income from the endowments were placed with the LGCs on trial basis during 2005-2006 financial year, bearing in mind that the endowments will only yield operational funds 12 months after they are opened. In May 2005, MACH drafted a management guideline circular in consultation with legal experts, based on the experience of the RMOs and LGCs. After incorporating comments from the MoFL and Senior/Upazila Fishery Officers (S/UFOs), the final circular covering a total endowment of Taka 36 million was approved by MOFL in January 2006 within two weeks of its submission through DoF.
- The success of MACH and effectiveness of the co-management arrangement as a framework for sustainable wetland management have encouraged DoF to consider this approach for other parts of the country. Consequently, this co-management structure has been approved by the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock as part of DOF's Inland Capture Fisheries Strategy which recommends the spreading of the approach to critical wetlands country-wide.



Hail Haor

## Transparency and Accountability

Transparent and accountable procedures and practices are essential for maintaining continuity of local government committees. A vertical and horizontal system of information flow promotes good practice.

- During the formation of LGCs MACH has put emphasis on establishing transparent procedures that make representatives in the committees more widely accountable their constituents and to each other. MACH maintains transparency by establishing communication systems both through feedback monitoring (LGC - RMO) and the local community groups through their General Body meetings and open-to-all sessions (RMO - greater community). Currently, MACH is also working with local institutions on developing report cards designed to keep a check on each institution from those that it represents.

## Timescale

Building trust, understanding, transparency and an effective working relationship between local government and community resource management organizations takes time.

- The approach developed by MACH evolved over time and was based on a participatory process, working with local stakeholders to understand problems and identify possible solutions. Community organizations were developed for resource management (RMOs) and for livelihood development (Resource User Groups or RUGs). These groups were then linked to the government through the formation of LGCs which will in future be called UFCs. Emphasis has been placed on making these institutions self reliant and self-sustaining, providing funds that they could manage, and establishing transparent procedures that make those taking decisions accountable. All this has happened over eight years, including the inception period.



Excavation

### Scale

This intensive approach may be more cost effective for larger wetland systems where sufficiently large core areas can be protected so that the restored wetland ecology will enhance fish catches in the remaining areas.

- MACH has worked in three large wetlands: i) Hail Haor, a large deeply flooded basin, ii) the Turag-Bangshi floodplain, a typical river-floodplain system, and iii) the Kangsha-Malijhee basin, a flash flood prone system. MACH organized RMOs representing more than 184,000 people from more than 110 villages directly dependent on these wetlands. In these sites the project has demonstrated that habitat restoration and conservation measures can be established through a co-management approach of communities and local government, and that this can bring benefits in terms of higher fish yields and fish consumption.

### KEY MESSAGE

Participation of local government in supporting community-based organizations in management of natural resources should be institutionalized through a MACH type LGC/UFC approach. Moreover, involving the UP chairmen as advisers to the community organizations is essential to ensure buy-in on resource management actions at the local level as well as helping to resolve conflicts. Prior to this, projects or GoB should concentrate on enhancing the skills of those who will represent community organizations in the LGCs, so they can effectively and confidently represent their communities' interests. Finally, efforts should be invested in setting up transparent procedures so that all members of the LGCs are accountable.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These policy recommendations are based on MACH project experiences between 2000 and 2006.

1. A Government Circular should be issued for the formation of Upazila Fishery Committees in all Upazilas where there are important water bodies and wetlands, especially where large wetlands are currently under no or very poor management.
2. Co-management arrangements need to be established where there are several water bodies making up an important wetland area.
3. Gradually rights to more of these water bodies should be reserved for community organizations under UFC supervision.
4. The community organizations should be encouraged to cooperate and network among one another.
5. Orientation of government officers (Upazila Fisheries Officer, Upazila Nirbahi Officer, Upazila Parishad Chairmen, and District Fisheries Officer) in these areas regarding this approach should be carried out.
6. Government should consider providing some fund for resource management in other critical wetland areas similar to the endowments of MACH.
7. Community based organizations in other areas should be allowed to attend Union Parishad meetings.
8. The local government committee (UFC) can undertake monitoring to ensure and reinforce the quality of CBO functioning and management activities.
9. Promote the Department of Fisheries (DoF) strategy for the management of inland capture fisheries, which has many if not most of the MACH recommendations embedded within it.
10. Policy changes in the future by central government should be made in consultation with local co-management bodies managing wetland resources.
11. The roles of the UNO, UFO and the Union Parishad chairmen in the UFC are very important in establishing the rights and authority of the community based resource management organizations and their sustainable management of the resource. This must be maintained.

### REFERENCES

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