



# UNSUNG HEROES of MACH



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Additional photos from MACH photo library

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## About the booklet

The main focus of our work is people- addressing issues related to wetland conservation for human welfare and bringing the local community to the forefront of the management of their own natural resources. This book tries to honour the spirit and achievements of the local people and leaders, who have placed trust in the MACH approach by embracing, experimenting with and promoting this approach. The booklet portrays them as the *Unsung Heroes of MACH* and also throws light on their individual experiences and collects their perspectives on achievements and livelihood gains.

The booklet includes eight stories (from 3 project sites<sup>1</sup>) showcasing experiences related to major components of the project, e.g. members of RMOs (Resource Management Organizations), FRUG leaders (Federation of Resource Users Group), Local Government representatives and Female participants at AIGA programs (Alternative Income Generating Activities). Those who are not familiar with the project will find a brief description of these components before moving on to the stories .

There are many more heroes of MACH than the limited few that have been written about here. However, it has not been possible to capture all the stories in this booklet. We do acknowledge here and pay tribute to the all of them who have worked with MACH over the last seven years-honouring their resilience, hard work, courage, innovation and persistence!

We would like the broadest of readership to enjoy the book including but not limited to non-specialists, aid and NGO workers, donors, decision-makers even youth. The objective is to inform, entertain and encourage at the same time.

MACH Project  
May 2006

1. Hail Haor in Moulvibazar district, Turag Bangshi in Gazipur district and Kangsha Malijhee in Sherpur district.

# Introducing Approaches

The major approaches of the MACH project that are frequently referred to in the case studies are:

## **Resource Management Organizations (RMOs)**

Each wetland system is made up of a series of smaller units - rivers or beels or floodplains - that share interconnected water in the monsoon but most often become separate water bodies isolated from each other when water levels fall in the dry season. For each of these units a Resource Management Organization or RMO has been formed. This followed a lengthy planning process involving all local wetland users and interests. Special emphasis was placed on the poor who are most dependent on wetlands, to ensure that they comprised a majority of the members and could have a voice in these organizations. These voluntary bodies have been registered with the Social Welfare Department of the government.

## **Federation of Resource Users Group (FRUGs)**

The institutions of resource management groups have been complemented by a linked system of Resource User Groups (RUG) that provide poor wetland users with training and credit to adopt alternative occupations. This is further strengthened by union based Federation of Resource Users Groups (FRUGs). This has reduced the pressure on wetland resources and at the same time enhances their incomes.

## **Local Government Committee (LGC)**

MACH has tried to formally link the RMOs with the Local government through the LGCs (Local Government Committees). The members comprise the leaders of all of the community organizations - the RMOs - in an upazila, the respective Upazilla Parishad Chairmen, and the relevant government officials of the Upazila or sub-district. They meet regularly to coordinate management over the whole wetland system in their area, to develop plans and approve works by the individual RMOs, and to address any problems.

## **Endowment Fund**

Sustainability of LGC approach has been a concern of MACH. With help from MACH project, the Government of Bangladesh has agreed to establish endowment funds that will provide modest funds in each of these upazilas that are managed by the committees for use by the RMOs in conserving and further restoring wetland resources.

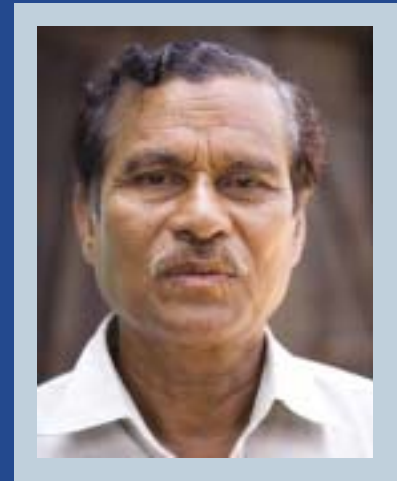
## Protecting an asset

Moajjem Hossein Somru belongs to various organizations in his area. Among them, Dumuria RMO is his most preferred organization, where he is the vice-chairperson. It takes up most of his time and he is proud of its achievements. He doesn't receive any remuneration and is not looking for any personal gains from representation in this organization. The gains are of much higher nature! Besides, he has a history of fighting for bigger gains, a *freedom fighter* and is by reputation a humanitarian.

Somru got involved with MACH in the year 2000. “We live around a huge haor called *Hail haor*. I never realized that we depend on the haor in so many ways! Farmers plough the lands in the haor, graze their cows, fishermen catch fish, sometimes excessively and other poor people make a living selling many aquatic plants like *Shingra* and *Shapla*.” He continues, “it was only when MACH started their activities and formed these organizations where fishermen, farmers, businessmen, elites of the society were included, we realized that Hail haor is an asset and we must protect it for the good of so many.”

One of the main achievements of Somru's organization was to create awareness among the local people about fisheries rules and environment hazards. Somru along with other members of Dumuria RMO organized a lot of meetings with local people. They also helped organize street dramas on the damages done to environment due to excessive fishing in the haor. As a part of the awareness raising campaign they regularly observe special days, for example 'World Wetland Day' and 'Environment Day'. All this has helped to create consciousness among people. Some of the conservation practices established are no one uses illegal nets and other destructive methods of fishing; pumping out water from the wet lands during the dry season was a common practice but now no one is allowed to do that. And all this is possible because now people are more conscious of the consequences. As Somru says- “people may not be educated here but one thing they know for sure- no sanctuary means no fish.” Somru and his organization have made sure that their Sanctuary is protected.

With pride Somru describes a few more successes of his organization- Dumuria RMO, with support from MACH has re-excavated wetlands which reconnected the canals with the river ensuring free movement of fish, planted trees along the banks of small canals that lead to Hail haor. These trees protect the banks from erosion and reduce silt deposits in the haor. Both the fishers and farmers having lands on the side of these canals are getting the benefits. Not just that, “now people are aware of health issues and education too. At least one person from every house goes to school now.”



**Moajjem Hossein Somru**

Vice-chairperson  
Dumuria RMO  
Sreemangal

## The best is yet to come



### **Minnat Ali**

Businessman/ Secretary  
Borogangina RMO  
Sreemangal

Minnat Ali opposed MACH when it started operating in his area. He even grabbed a portion of the Borogangina canal and tried to stop the work when MACH started re-excavation. Later, as he recalls, without regret, “when I learned all about the project, as a conscious person I had to join MACH group.” Now Minnat is the secretary of Borogangina RMO. As an active member of the RMO, he constantly protects the interest of his group. If he hears of anyone using an illegal net for fishing or planning to drain water from the wetlands, he rushes with other members of the RMO to the scene and presents the united conservation message. One time, the issue even went to the High Court. But it didn't discourage him from protesting the misuse. As he puts it, “conscious people never look back, they move forward. People of this area are conscious now.” Moreover, now they have the strength of a group!

Borogangina is a fishing village. Almost all of Minnat Ali's relatives are connected to fishing and fish business. He recalls that they saw a lot of fish 15/16 years ago which gradually went down till MACH started operating in the area. Now the number and types are again increasing. Some of the scarce species of fish are available too. All the people of Borogangina are benefitted with the increase and variety. Fishermen get more fish in less time, even poor people can afford to buy and eat fish.

Minnat is all praises about the additional income generation program introduced by CARITAS, a partner of MACH. The objective of this program was to reduce dependency on the fishing. Previously, Minnat Ali was a small businessman trading rice and paddy; utilizing the loan facility given under the program he has increased the volume of his business. Now Minnat Ali is known as a big businessman of Hajipara Ghat Bazar. He runs his daily activities of Borogangina RMO from his shop at the bazar.

There are more things to be ecstatic about! As he explains the good fortune, “this is of pure good fortune that people like me get to sit with the UNO and the UFO and the UP chairmen at the same table and discuss problems. Now we get solutions for our problems faster.” Minnat Ali strongly believes his Resource Management Organization will live forever. The main reasons are the financial support, the endowment fund that MACH is leaving behind and the creation of Local Government Committee (LGC). The work has just begun!

## Working hand in hand with the community

The RMO members (Resource Management Organization) refer to Mominul Haque, as one of their own. It seems that he has earned this reputation for good reasons. As the local opinion holds, “he is always willing to provide help and support to us.”

Mominul Haque joined Kaliakoir administration as the Upazilla Fisheries Officer (UFO) over one year ago, transferred in from Shibpur. He is the member secretary of LGC (Local Government Committee) initiated by MACH project. The Committee is chaired by the Upzila Nirbahi Officer; while other Upazilla officials, concerned Union Parishad Chairpersons are also included along with RMO representatives.

Mominul Haque finds the new system of wetland management and conservation practices quite interesting and beneficial. In his own words- “I believe the Department of Fisheries (DoF) can actually learn a lot and create an impact if they support initiatives like this.” True to his words, he is sincerely providing support to the RMOs in their management efforts in Kaliakoir. With his support the RMOs have improved the situation in the open waters of Kaliakoir. His constituency has seen improvements in the quality of life for a large number of people dependent on the wetlands. Fishermen have seen more than a 50% increase in their fish catch as well as the increase in fish diversity. His observation is, “with the increase in the number of fish the poor are also benefitted. We see a lot of new part-time fishers during the monsoon when the fish brim over from the sanctuary to rest of the water body.” There are undue instances too when certain groups forcefully fish in and around the sanctuary. Mr Haque uses his position as a government official when the community fails to manage situations like this.

Mr Haque explains that the strength of MACH project lies in the fact that it engaged and empowered the end users and community to take control of their own resources. The visible improvements have brought a change among the government officials in the Upazilla. He has high hopes for the 'LGC' in his area but the challenge remains with the RMOs, “as long as the RMOs stay pro-active, the government officials will continue to provide full support”. The partnership will grow more in time.



**Md. Mominul Haque**

Upzilla Fisheries Officer  
Kaliakoir

## Looking for a greater good for a greater number



### Shawkat Imran

Chairman  
Chapair Union  
Kaliakoir

Shawkat Imran is an elected leader of about 30,000 people from Chapair Union. When MACH started its activities in his area he kept a close watch on the project and only when he was convinced with their work, he extended his cooperation to them. “Rural people in our country are often cheated in the name of credit programs. So people are skeptical of any new organization working in the area. They come to Union Parishad Chairmen for suggestions as they know us and trust our judgment. If we tell them that- yes this organization is trustworthy only then it becomes very easy for that organization to get access to the people.”

Mr. Imran is a total convert now. He is involved with every single activity of MACH, big or small. He talked about various management and conservation activities the communities are involved in- “sanctuaries for fish are created, destructive gears are banned; fishing rights too are handed to the community. Maximum people are benefited by the activities except for a handful. These few are usually among the more influential and they are flexing their muscles every now and then.” Shawkat Imran steps in when the Resource Management groups or MACH staff find it hard to deal with these people. To him the interest of all his people comes first.

Moreover, he recalls that local a fish like Meni, Chitol, Kalibaush disappeared from the 'beels' around Kaliakoir. Children under the age of ten never saw these fish. MACH has re-introduced them and they are now seen in the local market. Children now not only know these fish, they can have a taste as well. During the dry season people dependent on 'beels' usually had no income. MACH helped them create a new income source by providing training and giving small loans to start new businesses. This has increased the living standards of poor people in Charpai. “Now all the members of a family earn whereas the entire family used to depend on one person's fishing income.”

Shawkat Imran also refers to his experience of being a member in the local Government Council (LGC). He feels that the way the LGCs have brought the community and local government together in a discussion table is an example in itself. This is how things should run in all other sectors of Government. The process not only ensures the involvement of the community, it also addresses the actual needs. The decisions are taken together rather than coming from the top. Doesn't this benefit all?



The people living around hail haor depend on it for many purposes other than just catching fish- for example feeding ducks, grazing cows and selling aquatic plants on the sides of the Hail haor.



Permanent Sanctuary in Turag-Bangshi.



Raising awareness on wetland conservation through theater activities.



Upazilla Fisheries Officer of Jhenaigathi is inaugurating a canal excavation.



## Toyobul Islam

Imam, President  
Kalapur FRUG  
Sreemangal.

## Committed to the cause

Toyobul Islam's long day starts with the crack of dawn. He leads the first prayer of the day in the local mosque as an *Imam*. Next, he gives religious lessons to 30 students in his *madrassa* (religious school). During the course of the day other than performing his share of the household chores, he also teaches in the adult literacy program managed by MACH and works as an assistant to Kazi (marriage register). On top of all this, he performs efficiently as the President of Kalapur FRUG (Federation of Resource Users Group).

There is no benefit or remuneration for FRUG President. It is a voluntary work. When asked why he carries on as a President, the Imam said- "if I can be of any help to others- it pleases me the most. If people and my society are benefited by my work I am also benefited." As the President of the FRUG he has to monitor the micro credit scheme and the viability of projects supported by the RUGs (Resource Users' Group). Toyobul thinks that the micro credit has helped a large number of people living around the haor, introducing them to a different source of income often resulting in improved living conditions. MACH-CARITAS provides training to the group members in sectors such as poultry, duck rearing, goat rearing, beef fattening, nursery, sewing and many others. After the training the members get a loan to start their business. He informs, "this support has opened up a new window of opportunities for the members, especially women. Traditionally, women are confined within the four walls of their houses. Now with money in their hands they have become economically empowered and more confident. This too has brought changes within their homes- children are getting more food as well as more children in our locality are going to schools than before." Here is a progressive man with genuine concerns about his people and a lot to contribute to his society.

Toyobul Islam strongly believes that all the management and AIGA (Alternative Income Generating Activities) will continue after MACH withdraws from his area- "people are committed to the cause and are more aware now". With natural leaders like Toyobul Islam living there, they might sustain after all.

## Hoping to change many more lives like his

Abdul Mannan Munshi has become a respectable person in his community. His presence is essential in various social gatherings. People seek his advice and his opinion is valued in the community. To him, it feels like a dream, the dream that started a little over five years ago with MACH.

Abdul Mannan Munshi was a fisherman for 25 years. Fishermen are held in very low esteem in the community, particularly those who fish in the 'beels'. They are called the 'Jhalos' (a slang) and ignored.

There are five 'beels' around Mannan's house. He used to fish in all five of them as a fisherman. In the beginning he would catch a lot of fish which gradually declined. He can remember times when he would spend 10/12 hours but catching fish barely enough to sustain his family. But, the number of fish these days has increased again many folds although Mannan has quit being a fisher. He has found himself an alternative income source; he received training and loans from MACH-CARITAS. His hard work combined with the opportunity has changed his life. Due to improvements in his economic condition, his social status has also gone up.

Mannan has been the President of Pakuria-Dhola-Bodshala FRUG (Federation of Resource Users Group) for the last two years. He is making rapid progress with his organization, and he thinks it is happening with the support he gets from the local government officials and the elected public leaders. The service he provides to his organization is voluntary. The only reason he does is with a hope that his organization will continue changing lives like his. As the leader of the FRUG he guides his fellow members by providing valuable advice on which enterprise they should take a loan for.

Like others Mannan too thinks that the formation of Local Government Committee (LGC) has given the community a chance to get closer to the authority. Mannan believes that the Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (UNO) and other upzilla officials pay more attention to their area because of the LGC. The elected chairmen also take a special interest.

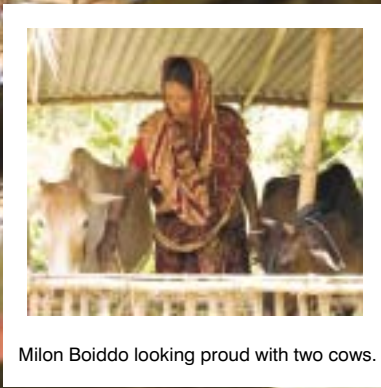


**Mohammad Abdul  
Mannan Munshi**

President  
Pakuria-Dhola-Bodshala FRUG  
Sherpur



Sufia's poultry farm is as big as her house. She built the farm taking loan from MACH and with additional support from BREAD project.



Milon Boiddo looking proud with two cows.



Toybul Islam teaches adults who join the adult literacy program supported by MACH.



Mannan Munshi is reviewing proposals for AIGA projects submitted by the members of his group.

## Striving to touch her dreams

Sufia Begum is the chairperson of Chengaria Shapla Mohiala Somity (women's group), a group with twenty members. All the members come from fisher families. But now only five families live on fishing while three-quarters have moved on to different profession. Sufia was among the first to join MACH programs in Sherpur.

Sufia took a loan of tk. 50,000 and started a poultry farm in her house which is as big as her house. She has paid back half of her loan and is confident about paying back the rest. Now she has 131 hens and gets 120 eggs per day. She invested her profit from the poultry into taking some land on lease and planting paddy. The crop was good this time; her small courtyard is filled with the harvest. She plans to invest more next year, maybe even buy some land. Sufia's work load has increased so much with her farm that she wanted to step down from the chairpersonship of the somity. But all the members strongly opposed as they find her to be a good leader and are still not ready to let her go.

Sufia is a good leader within the family too. She also helped her husband find a new employment. Previously, she and her husband had a hard life when they were totally dependent on fishing. Most of the fishing beels were privately owned; he had to give one third of his catch to the owner and his share was not even enough for two. She took a loan and invested it in a furniture business. Gradually, Ramzan, Sufia's husband, learned carpentry and their business grew bigger.

Sufia with others in her village has found a new life. Her son along with many other children from the area attend school now. Sufia feels she can almost touch her dreams.



### **Mosammat Sufia Begum**

Chairperson  
Chengaria Shapla Mohiala Somity  
Sherpur.



## Milon Boiddo

Chairperson  
Modhumita Mohila Somity  
Sheemangal

## Working hard to make her dreams come true

Milon Boiddo received tree nursery-training under MACH alternative income generating activities program. After completing the training she took a loan of 4000 taka; added 5000 taka more out of her own savings and started a nursery. Her nursery sold twelve thousand seedlings for 50,000 taka, making enough profit to move on to bigger ventures. She took a larger piece of land on lease and invested 30,000 taka, half of which was a loan from the project. This time she got a return of 100,000taka. Milon talks of her achievements with pride-“I received tree nursery-training along with 15 others and training on rearing of cows along with 12 others. Why aren't others as successful as I am? It's not just the training that matters, it is also how you want to make use of your training and how hard you are willing to work, that makes the difference.” Even Milon's enemy would say she works really hard to make her dreams come true.

Milon has a very good sense of business targeting the local needs. She invested a part of the profit from the nursery to buy a water pump. During the dry season she rents out the pump for irrigation. She also started rearing cows, now she has two. She bought the piece of land where she had the nursery. This year she expects a return of 250,000 taka from it. Milon dreams of expanding her nursery as well as starting another new business opening a rice-husking mill.

Milon's husband is still doing farming and fishing but not so much for livelihood- “it is more like holding on to the tradition” says Milon. It is Milon's earnings that keep the family going. All family members take part in maintaining the nursery, water pump and cows. They know the value of these assets in their lives.

Milon wants her children to break free from poverty and illiteracy. She will make every effort to provide them with the highest level of education. She believes education is the only way they are sure to move to a better life.

Milon is an inspiration to many, both men and women. She is the chairperson of Modhumita Mohila Somity from the inception. Her group looks up to her for leadership which she is more than capable of providing. She believes MACH has given them the opportunity for a new start. She and all of her group members will make the most out of it.

Many women can be seen coming out of their houses everyday either to go to work, attend adult education classes, or somity meetings. Once this was a rare scene in a conservative town like Sreemangal.



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Project Partners:

Winrock International  
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