



Support to Co-Management in the Sundarbans Mangrove Forest

Management of the Sundarbans Mangrove Forests for Biodiversity Conservation and Increased Adaptation to Climate Change Project (SMP)

Background: Co-management in the Sundarbans Mangrove Forest

The Sundarbans constitute the world's largest continuous mangrove forest (10,000km²) located within a massive river delta system between India and Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Sundarbans Mangrove Forest (SMF), covering an area of 6,017km², is protected through restricting resource use and access rights to varying degrees. Due to its inaccessibility, unique and globally important biodiversity has remained preserved and the Sundarbans have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD) is the official custodian of the SMF and responsible for its protection.

There are no permanent settlements inside the SMF. However, a large number of people living in its periphery depend on the mangrove ecosystem for their livelihood: People enter the forest – some legally some illegally – to harvest natural resources including fish, nypa palm and honey. Only when the needs and concerns of those people are considered in decision making about the SMF, SMF governance can be sustainable on the long term.

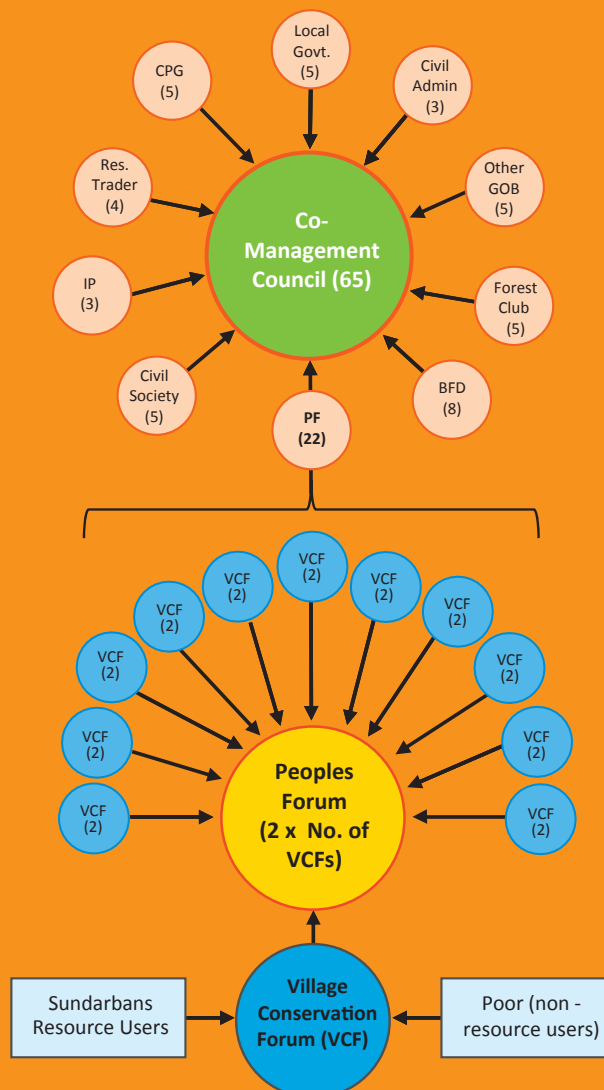


Collaborative management or co-management has proven to be an important tool for good governance in natural resource management across many ecosystems. Co-management seeks to incorporate resource users in decision making processes as well as to increase accountability and sharing of responsibility. The expected result is a more equitable and sustainable resource conservation backed by resource users, management authorities and other relevant stakeholders.

Co-management structures of the SMF

In Bangladesh, co-management of protected areas, including the establishment of co-management organisations is enshrined in the national law (Wildlife Preservation and Security Act 2012). In the SMF, a tree-tiered co-management structure has been in practice since 2011.

1. Village Conservation Fora (VCFs), established at community level, are the basis of the co-management system. SMF resource users as well as the poorest section of the communities adjacent to the SMF can become members of the respective VCF. It is managed by an executive body.
2. The People's Forum (PF) is the next tier established at Forest Range level constituting the umbrella structure of resource users and poorest people. Each VCF in the respective range is represented in the PF by two elected representatives (one male and one female). It likewise has an executive body.
3. The overarching structures for co-management are the Co-Management Councils (CM Council) at Forest Range level. Their executive bodies are called Co-Management Committees (CMCs). Both have representatives from the PF, the BFD, other government agencies, the local government, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders. The CM Council is the highest body for co-management of the respective Forest Range.



Challenges for co-management in the SMF

Although different co-management structures have been established¹ and much progress has been made towards a more equitable and participatory management of the SMF, several challenges remain.

VCFs, as the foundation of the overall co-management structures of the SMF, are still comparatively weak. Resource users are not yet fully represented in the VCFs and PFs nor can they adequately voice their concerns about issues particularly relevant to them. Moreover, VCFs and PFs have limited organizational capacity and processes, such as coordination and communication, are not yet fully functioning. Limited understanding about co-management and the expected roles of different co-management tiers are other prevalent issue among the community level tiers as well as among staffs of the BFD.

Only when resource users have the capacity to effectively participate in decision making about the SMF, their aspirations towards co-management can be met. At the same time, it is important that the BFD, particularly frontline staffs, have a good understanding about co-management practices and that processes are in place to facilitate effective co-management.



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Management of the Sundarbans Mangrove Forests for Biodiversity Conservation and Increased Adaptation to Climate Change (SMP) is a project of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, supported by the German Federal

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SMP has the following overall goal: Government agencies at the national and local level, that are responsible for the management of the SMF, as well as co-management structures, have implemented mechanisms that improve the management of the SMF. To contribute to this goal, SMP supports the BFD to better fulfill its role within the co-management structures and at the same time to strengthen the participation of resource users in decision making about the SMF. SMP's support to further development of the co-management approach focuses on Chandpai Range of the SMF with 37 VCFs, 1 PF and 1 CMC. SMP collaborates with the local NGO Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS) to implement selected activities on the ground.

Women in co-management of the SMF

In the SMF, women rarely enter the forest for direct resource harvesting due to cultural norms and practical constraints. Still, they are equally dependent on the SMF and its natural resources since the overall household income depends on their contributions: Women often do the bulk of work associated with processing the harvest. Also, women have good knowledge about the needs and concerns of a household and bring in a different set of personal and organisational skills that could benefit the co-management structures.

SMP has a special focus on gender: By promoting equal participation of women in co-management and their access to benefits derived from the SMF, SMP aims to enhance one of the core aspects of good governance. Specific activities include

- gender-sensitive components in all surveys conducted by SMP concerning the current status, challenges and needs of women towards equitable participation in co-management and improved access to natural resources
- organizational development, such as the formation of women groups under the umbrella of existing co-management structures, and capacity development to increase women's participation in decision making about the SMF
- development of a guideline at CMC level for the equitable participation of women in co-management to institutionalise gender equity in co-management.

¹ Co-management of protected areas in Bangladesh was largely supported under three consecutive USAID-funded interventions: the Nishorgo Project, Integrated Protected Area Co-Management (IPAC) project, and Climate Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods (CREL) project.

Activities and Achievements

- In February 2017, SMP conducted a participatory governance assessment for (co-)management of the SMF involving more than 150 participants from government agencies and civil society. Strengths and challenges related to six core principles of good governance (effective participation, fair sharing of benefits, law enforcement, accountability, policy coordination, and achievement of conservation objectives) were identified and were fed into the design of the measures under this component.
- SMP is conducting a comprehensive household census covering all 37 VCF-associated villages in Chadpai Range in order to better understand the dependency of households on SMF resources and the involvement of resource users in co-management. Based on that, consecutive measures for organizational and capacity development have been designed.
- A concept for capacity development of VCFs and PF with a focus on strengthening the participation of resource users and women in co-management structures was developed.
- To improve organizational structures of co-management in the SMF, SMP formulated guidelines for the formation and operation of resource users groups and women groups under the umbrella of the existing co-management structures. The purpose and functioning of these groups will be further developed in a participatory way with their members.
- By organising trainings and other learning events SMP intends to improve organizational and leadership skills as well as other capacities to improved participation of resource users and women in co-management.



- SMP accompanies and mentors VCF members in holding regular meetings, preparing meeting minutes, holding free, fair, participatory and credible elections, and following up of activities etc. For this purpose, support to communicating their decisions and concerns to other co-management tiers, better networking with external service providers to facilitate access to funding as well as linkages with relevant BFD entities will also be given.
- Also, informative factsheets of all 37 VCFs have been developed and are regularly updated based on the progress of each VCF.
- SMP promotes dialogue among and sensitization of community members on topics such as gender and the role of women in co-management, inclusion of poor resource users, biodiversity conservation, as well as the importance of equitable participation of resource users in decision making about the SMF. Thereby current challenges can be identified and suitable mitigation measures can be initiated.

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