

Conference Paper 09

A green horizontal band with silhouettes of people and a heart.

Sunamganj Community Based Resource  
Management Project (SCBRMP): an approach to  
sustainable beel fisheries management

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## SUMMARY

Sunamganj is a land dominated by floodplains with seasonally flooded tectonic depressions known locally as haors and smaller water bodies known as beels. People's livelihoods and culture are largely dominated by the haor economy where beel fisheries play a very critical role. Although the beel has a wide range of resources, the people at large have not been able to benefit from them. A small number of people by virtue of their power and influence have been exploiting the resources overriding all the codes of resource management and maintenance.

SCBRMP of Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) has a mandate to assist the people so they can get access to the resources. The project implements a process which is derived largely from a Community Based Resource Management (CBFM) approach. It is a demand driven approach set by a comprehensive discussion with a wide variety of stakeholders. Beel access is achieved through two steps. One is beel handover to genuine fishers on a long-term basis, and the second is initiating beel resource development activities. Under a series of Memoranda of Understandings, the project has been allocated beels (both above and below 20 acres in size) from concerned ministries and who hand over the water bodies to Beel User Groups (BUG) comprising of mainly fishers. A set of criteria is followed to select the BUG members and BUG functions under a byelaw that contains some core values to form an independent institution of beel users.

From beel selection to formation of the BUG and initiating beel resource development, a participatory approach is followed where local people's knowledge and experts' views are duly consulted at all stages of work.

BUG members are trained to raise their skill levels on group management and beel resource development. The beel resource development activities comprise of demarcation, re-excavation, swamp tree plantation, establishing sanctuaries and introducing conservation measures. Some surveys and studies on fish catch and consumption, fish marketing and biodiversity are also included in beel fisheries of the project.

One visible strength of the project's approach is its partnership with other departments and institutions. SCBRMP is implementing its beel fisheries activities at the field level with cooperation from the local administration, DoF and the WorldFish Center.

The project has a goal of access to 300 beels in Sunamganj District by June 2014. Meanwhile 55 beels of different sizes have been accessed and handed over to BUGs. Out of 55, 50 have been harvested and 10 have been brought under development activities.

The project is at early stage. It is advancing through learning by doing. Meanwhile a good number of lessons have already been learnt. Clearly, sustainable beel resource management is largely a social issue rather than technical and people's views are to be utilized with full potential for such natural resource management.

## INTRODUCTION

The project was developed based on the Country Strategy Opportunity Paper (CSOP) of IFAD and its goal lies with PRSP and MDG. Understandably, poverty reduction therefore is the prime concern of the project, and giving priority to the most deprived zone, Sunamganj haor area has been chosen considering its numerous vulnerabilities and backwardness.

The project will cover the entire 11 Upazilas of Sunamganj district and has a target to reach 135,000 households who are holding below 2.5 acres of farm land. The project will be implemented in three phases comprising a total of 12 years starting from January 2003 and ending in June 2014.

The project comprises of five major components. These are: Labour Intensive Infrastructure Development; Institution Building; Microfinance Services; Agriculture and Livestock Development; and Fisheries Development while gender and environmental issues are cross-cutting. Training, both for staff and the people, is another activity cutting across all components of the project.

The total cost estimate of the project is US\$ 26.28 million, with an IFAD loan of US\$ 22.0 million, a contribution of US\$ 4.5 million from the Government of Bangladesh and a US\$ 0.3 million contribution by the community/beneficiaries in labour, kind and cash.

The project follows a people centred approach. The core objective of the approach is to mobilize the poor and inspire them to accumulate their potential to build a self help society with a vision of achieving prosperity and aspirations to secure the future. With that view, grassroots organizations were formed, both for males and females, at remote villages over all the Upazilas<sup>1</sup> of Sunamganj district. In future this will build into a stronger and more effective institutional formation plan involving representatives from these primary groups to form a federation of poor communities.

The members of the organizations are being trained following need-based assessments to raise their human and technical skills in order to enhance their capacity to access and manage the livelihood resources sustainably. Furthermore, the project aims at establishing a pool of technically skilled activists

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<sup>1</sup> Administrative unit of the government under the District level.

to continue the technical extension services and maintain close relationship with extension components of the project.

The project also creates scope to access natural and other physical resources. These form capital for better investment through systematic savings accumulation. Access to credit for the poor is also a vital ingredient of the development approach of SCBRMP to assist the people in alleviating poverty.

The most challenging part of the project is access into beel resources. Having long-term tenure of beel resources and giving those to the genuine community for maintaining their livelihoods and ensuring their sustainable management are key indicators for assessing the success of the project.

## SCBRMP OBJECTIVES AND FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED

Beel fisheries are part of the fisheries component of the project. Under this component the project will take over a total 300 beels during its total 12 year period of operation.

The core objectives of beel fisheries are:

- Transfer the beels to genuine fisher communities on a long-term basis
- Establish community based fisheries management
- Initiate development activities to restore the degraded resource base
- Initiate activities to establish conservation measures for fish habitat and biodiversity restoration
- Develop an institution of beel user groups for sustainable resource management

In order to attain these objectives some factors have been found to be crucial:

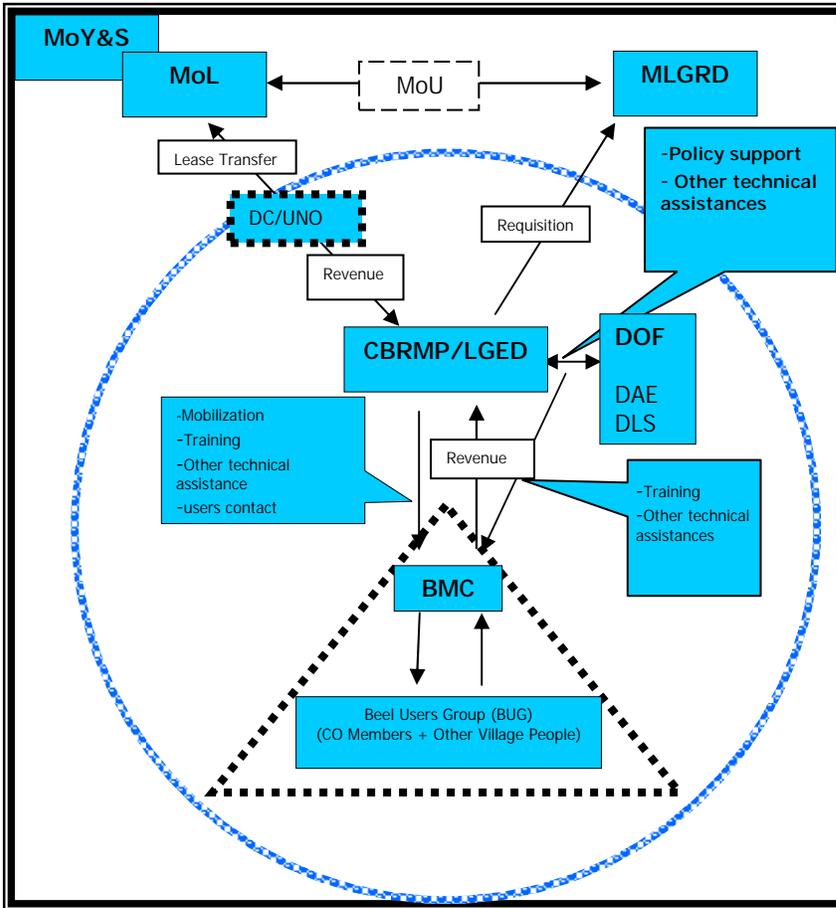
- Clearly defined and identified group of beel users
- Clearly defined boundaries of the resource base
- A responsive and transparent management
- Equitable cost and benefit sharing
- Long term user rights on resources
- Cost effectiveness
- Institutional, technical and legal support from concerned authorities for sustainable use of resources
- Community capacity to exclude non-user community members
- Local social and political support

## THE APPROACH

The approach includes the activities: resource mapping to understand the physical status of beel with identifying its command villages and intended

beneficiaries, setting criteria to select accessible beels, PRA based investigation to understand the resource status and its development scope, and, selecting genuine users and interested fishers for forming beel user group (BUG).

It is a process that involves the concerned Ministries along with the beel users to follow comprehensive guidelines conducive for promoting community based resource management. The guidelines ensure the roles and responsibilities of all concerned towards sustainable use of resources and benefiting fisher communities. Beels above 20 acres are transferred under a Memorandum of



Understanding (MoU) to LGED through the Local Government Ministry, and from LGED to the community. Beels below 20 acres are transferred under MoUs to LGED and then to the community. The transfer is made for total 20 years in two 10 year phases. The lease value of the beel is paid by the community and the process and conditionality for that is settled by an MoU which is mutually developed by the project and the community.

Fig. 1: Institutional framework for the beel transfer process

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF BEEL USER GROUPS

The BUG is the basic structure of the beel users. It consists of fishers who live in the beel command villages. The users are selected from a list based on social mapping where all villagers are listed by occupation and their wellbeing status. The BUG has a governing body called a Beel Management Committee (BMC). The BMC comprises 7 to 9 members and they lead the BUG being guided by byelaws developed by the BUG members after consultation with experts. The

BUG as the user of the beel has many roles and responsibilities. Of those, a few are regular such as group meetings, savings and maintenance of the beel and a few are occasional or seasonal such as depositing lease value, re-excavation of beel, planting of swamp trees, guarding, harvesting and conservation activities.

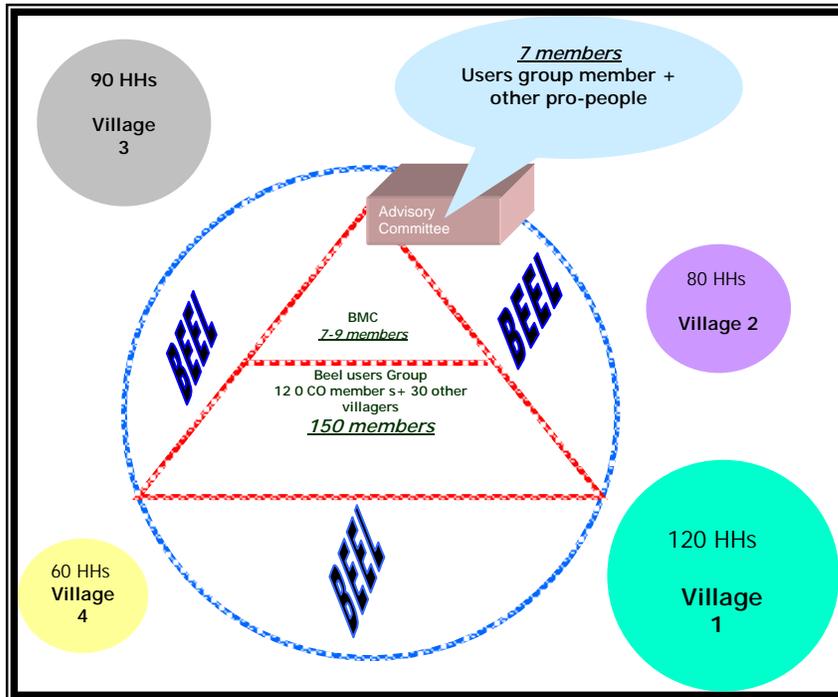


Fig. 2: The institutional structure of community based fisheries management

The most focused responsibilities of the BUG are to maintain the beel with sustainability and all actions in relation to beel management are carefully resigned to attain that.

In addition to the BMC there is a structure called the Advisory Committee. This is a structure formed consisting of local people with a view to assisting the BUG when there is crisis or conflict. The committee has no share in the beel resource or any voting rights in the formation of the BMC, but their role and support are counted as highly vital to the BUG to solve many local problems related to beel management.

### **Fishing rules and responsibilities**

Fishing is done in accordance with the Fish Conservation Act and some customary rules supportive to sustainable fisheries resource management. There is provision for three categories of fishing; individual, subsistence and group based seasonal major fishing. However the project is yet to formulate a concrete policy for subsistence and individual fishing, and therefore only group fishing is in practice. During the major fishing season, a group of fishers undertakes beel fishing which is usually completed in three or four rounds of fishing.

### **Income distribution**

Income from beel resources is distributed equally to all members of the BUG irrespective of gender and class of fisher. However, if anyone from the BUG gives any labour in beel management that is treated separately and compensated accordingly as decided by BUG.

### **Beel development**

Beel development is an important part of the beel fisheries. The focus of the activity is basically on fish habitat restoration and restoring the beel environment. The initiative comprises two kinds of activities one is compensating and other is remedial. Planting swamp trees and re-introducing scarce fish species come under the compensating measure and re-excavation of beels to remove silt and restore the connectivity of beel with the mainstream haor system falls under the remedial measure.

Development is undertaken based on a master plan developed with the participation of beel users, other villagers, representatives of DoF and DAE, administrative people and beel resource development experts. However the master plan is revised every year to fit it with the context and to make it more practical.

### **Monitoring and impact study**

BUG performance is monitored under the mainstream M&E system of the project on a monthly basis. Besides, fish catches and consumption, and benefit distribution records are maintained and registered at the BUG level and necessary reports are prepared at regular intervals.

Apart from this, some impact level studies on biodiversity, fisher livelihoods and marketing and value chain have been included in the fisheries component.

### **Conflicts and constraints to access**

Conflict in resource access particularly in haor areas is very common. In our experience the major reasons behind this are:

- Conflict of interest between vested interest group and genuine fisher
- Existing laws often favour the vested interest group and hamper the access process
- Lease values are sometimes not commensurate with beel productive capacity and the income it generates
- Excessive pressure from the authorities to transfer the lease immediately after it has been surrendered by the previous leasee before the BUG has been formed and is ready

It has been difficult to establish access to beels for fishers against the interests of vested classes even after they have legal rights to them. There are many legal

loopholes and through exploiting them, the vested interests create obstacles to legal access of fisher to beel resources. In some cases the lease value was not set at reasonable levels, when compared to the potential for production. This may be a result of irrational bidding by the vested groups in earlier bidding, thereby outplaying the poor fishers. Despite this, the high lease rate exists and therefore fisher communities may not be interested in those beels. Sudden surrender of the beel by previous leasee, thereafter forcing the authority to receive the beel before a community organization has been formed has been another major problem. These issues demand that there are amendments made to the leasing process. The leasing authority needs to think about the overall wellbeing of the resources and the fisher community beyond only revenue collection.

### Progress

The project is still at an early stage of beel access and development. Meanwhile the concerned Ministry has handed over 93 beels to the project, 22 above 20 acres and 71 below 20 acres (Table 1). Out of the 55 Beels have been given to BUG and the rest are in process. Out of 55 beels which have been given to BUGs, 50 have been harvested, and 10 have undergone development activities. Through all those activities the project has had many learning experiences some of which are bitter and some are interesting, but all are important.

Table 1: Beel transfer and activities

Activities	Target	Achieved
Transfer status from MoL and MoYS to CBRMP	93	93
Transferred to community		
> 20 acre	13	10
< 20 acre	54	45
BMC formed		
> 20 acre	13	10
< 20 acre	54	45
Harvested		
> 20 acre	10	10
< 20 acre	45	40

## LESSONS LEARNT

1. Access to beels might not be a major problem, but holding on to control of beels is often a big problem. If the process of beel selection and access is done through cooperation and consultation with the local community and through mobilising the users prior to handover of the beel, then access as well as retaining control over the resources becomes easier. However, conflict between vested interest groups and fisher communities is common because it is against the interests of the influential people in the

community often known as the 'elite'. Therefore establishing poor fisher's rights on beels is always difficult. It needs organised efforts with constant institutional support.

2. A comprehensive training scheme for beel users is required to build their capacity in social, technical and institutional areas to attain sustained management of the beel fisheries.
3. An effective advisory board is a critical need to assist the BUGs to deal with conflicts related to beel access and management. For that it is necessary to mobilize local champions and other people in favour of the approach to support and assist the BUGs through an Advisory Board.
4. Value based rules and laws developed by BUG with the assistance of community based fisheries management experts members should be in place for good governance of beel management with the focus on establishing a rights-based stewardship approach, and thereafter to achieve sustainable management of beel fisheries.
5. Beel demarcation is an essential part of beel fisheries management. A well coordinated and cooperative approach by concerned Departments with active participation of the community is necessary to implement it successfully. Successful demarcation is an indicator of community's strength and interest to get access to the beel.
6. Beel resource development should be integrated with the overall haor system development as beels are an integral part of the wider system. A haor based total approach is required for beel development.
7. Arranging for fisher communities to pay for leases is not a problem if their rights to exploit the resources in the long-term are guaranteed and in all aspects of beel management and development their participation and interest is ensured in a transparent manner.

## CONCLUSION

Community based beel resource management is getting increased attention from all concerned with establishing better natural resource management. Its contribution to increased production, restoring natural diversity and benefiting genuine fishing communities are highly appreciated. The success of such management basically lies in its values and the interest of the community and support from the concerned institutions. It gives the community rights and responsibilities to take care of their resource base and make their livelihood on it by a process under their control. The ultimate success of it largely depends on better coordination and cooperation among the concerned policy institutions, administrations, intermediary organizations and the community. People's capacity and access in decision of natural resource management is crucial to attain a sustainable resource management.