

# Assessing Community Participation in Decision-Making Process under Co-Management: A Case Study on Hail Haor, Bangladesh

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**Abstract**—Power, responsibility sharing, and democratic decision-making are the central ethos to co-management. It is assumed that involving local community in the decision-making process can create a sense of ownership and responsibility of that community and motivate the community towards collective action. But this paper demonstrated that the process to involve local community is not simple and straightforward as it is influenced by structural aspects, power relations among the actors, and social embedded institutions. These factors shape the process in that way who will participate, how they will participate and how the local community maneuvers their agency in the decision-making process. To grasp the complexities that materialize in the process of participation and to understand the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of participation, this paper examines the subjective understanding of different stakeholders concerning participation and furthermore observes the enabling or constraining factors that affect the community to exercise their agency.

**Keywords**—Participation, social embeddedness, power, structure.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**C**O-MANAGEMENT is a tool for sustainable management of wetland resources whereby community people and government entities manage the water body under collaboration or partnership and follow the participatory process of regulatory decision-making among representative of resource user groups, local government administration, line agencies and research organizations [1]. It refers to ‘a situation in which two or more social actors negotiate, define and guarantee amongst themselves a fair sharing of the management functions, entitlements and responsibilities for a given territory, area or set of natural resources’ [2]. From an eclectic ideology it is thought that decentralization and involving local community in decision-making process and managing wetland resources will certainly create a sense of ownership among the local level resource user that will sufficiently control the free-rider problem of common property resources.

Indeed the process is not simple and straightforward. Resource management under the framework of sharing power and responsibility embedded in a set of larger relationships. Community is comprised of people who actively monitor, interpret, and shape the world around them. In the context of natural resource management and conservation, community cannot be contextualized as a static concept i.e. small spatial unit, homogenous social structure or shared norms and

common interest [3]. It is considered as a multidimensional i.e. highly unequal along lines of caste, gender, age, or ethnicity, cross-scale, social-political units or networks that is changing over the times [4]. In co-management condition community may perhaps behave in highly unpredictable way. Some communities may decide to speak with a single voice despite differences of interests within the community where others may have lack of such cohesion in the face of within-community differences [2]. Community participation may be negotiated and shaped by prevalent social norms, structures, and the process of social inclusion, exclusion and subordination [5]. Thus the democratic decision-making processes do not always lead to a good environmental policy [6] and may especially disadvantage the socially marginalized group.

Appropriation and subordination both are central to power relations that work invisibly and create static view of naturalization and legitimation untenable [7]. Existing participatory literature is very imprecise in making links between the process of social inclusion, subordination and exclusion as it consistently ignores an inclusive analysis on the structural aspects, political aspects, and power relations.

In this ground, this paper is an attempt to observe how power works explicitly in the process of co-management and influence the decision-making phase in favor of dominant class, which ultimately limit the scope of the wetland community to participate and to convey their decision regarding managing wetlands under co-management. Moreover this paper also seeks to find out the factors that eases and underpins the process of subordination and domination. Thus the aim is not only to focus on complexities but to identify the factors that influence the participation process and decision-making process. The structure of this paper is as follows. It first conceptualizes participation and then it presents the methodology that has applied to extract the information. Then it goes into detail a case study in the Hail Haor in Bangladesh and explores the circumstances of the participation under co-management arrangement. This paper concludes with some recommendations that may address the problems of community involvement in the decision-making process.

## II. CONCEPTUALIZING PARTICIPATION IN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Participation indicates community-level involvement in the decision-making processes, implementing the programs, sharing the benefits of the programs, and efforts to evaluate the programs [8]. The concept of involving local community

in decision-making process established on the ground of solving the problems of common property resources (CPRs). Difficulty of exclusion and subtractability are two unique properties in the context of common property resources that potentially generate common property resources dilemma, where individuals focus on their short term interests produce outcomes without concerning other's long term interest [9]. In consequence, it creates the problem of overexploitation and misuse of the resources. But it is also claimed that individuals often adopt a narrow, self-interested viewpoint in different context but they also apply reciprocity, an internalized personal norm to overcome social dilemmas [9]. This attitudes of individuals, who use reciprocity to gain a reputation for trustworthiness, interact each other and establish a network enhance others willingness to cooperate, which ultimately overcome common property resources dilemmas [9]. This impenetrable social network also encourages the development of reciprocity norm through conveying information among individuals [9]. Participation is therefore supposed to depends on mobilization process, upon the understanding amongst participants that high levels of involvement are for their own benefit [10]. For participation theorist this new form of participation is instrumental in that world where people increasingly lack control over resources [11].

But in the context of common property resources, this reciprocal cooperation is not solely sufficient to prevent exploitation of natural resources and hence the common property resource problem can be solved in two ways: restricting access and creating incentives for users to invest in the resource instead of overexploiting [9]. With the purpose of solving the problem participants or external authorities purposely formulate rules that can bound and specify the usage of common property resources in relation to who can use, how much and when that use will be allowed along with monitoring arrangements and instituting sanctions for non-conformance [9]. Institutions at this point help to structure the interactions that take place around resources [3] and institutional arrangements shape the processes of endowments and entitlement mapping in a society [12]. Polycentric governance arrangements cover diverse types of institutions and stakeholders, operating at different scales and levels of formality, with variable interests in the management of natural resources and differing access to institutions [13].

In the management of natural resources there are two broad categories of property right: collective choice rights and operational level rights [14]. Operational level rights are controlled through operation level rules that are generally agreed-upon, used as enforced prescriptions for more than a single individual and can be changed through collective choice action and within a set of collective choice rules that specify who may participate in changing operational rules, and the level of agreement required for their change [14]. In case of common pool resources, two important operational level rights are: access and withdrawal right. On the other hand, collective choice property right embraces management, exclusion and alienation right. Management right allows its holders to regulate the internal use patterns through planning how, when and where harvesting from a resource may occur, and how the structure of a resource can be transformed [14]. Exclusion right authorizes its holders to determine who will have the

operational-level of access and how the right can be transferred [14]. The right of alienation permits the right holder to sell or lease either or both of the management and exclusion rights to another individual or group [14]. Property right at this point can be contextualized as a means to empowerment, involving different stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Empowerment embraces participation as a process that enhances the ability of participants to improve their own lives and facilitates societal change to the advantage of the disadvantaged [10]. Nevertheless, the discourse surrounding participation and empowerment has received critical reflections. In a society a person can be placed in several ways on the subject of social relations, and accordingly hold specific social identities. In analyzing the concept of empowerment inconsistencies arise on the ground of who is targeted to be empowered; the individual, the community or different categories of people such as women, underprivileged or socially excluded [10]. Behind the core concept of co-management-sharing power and responsibility, one thing that repeatedly ignore is power differentials and socially embedded institutions. Jentoft [15] argued for a fixed amount of power that a society constantly hold and empowerment in that case, concerned only with the redistribution of that power and responsibility among those who form the fisheries management chain but not with increasing the power.

Empowerment is like a zero-sum game and it cannot materialize without disempowering a certain group or a community [15]. From this angle, property rights ultimately point toward a process to empower the property holders by disempowering those who are excluded from enjoying the resource benefit that stream from that property [15].

So a very important point here is how different categories of people (according to age, ethnicity, social position, and gender) exercise their agency in participating in the decision-making process of the resource management. Cleaver [5] in this regard introduced the concept of 'moral-ecological rationality', which specifies unspoken cosmological assumptions that unwittingly shape human agency, influence individual to negotiate, to comply with unwritten norms of resource use, and to follow collective decision. More specifically this is particularly an unconscious motivation of conscious action as well as unconscious self-disciplining of agents and internalization of hegemonic norms [5]. Both of these conscious and unconscious emotions are vital in shaping people's understanding of self-efficacy and social relationships [5]. It is necessary to consider the actions human agents as a process [10]. Individuals draw upon local rules of civility and appositeness through social interaction and by doing so they reproduce these local rules [16] in a routinized way. Douglas [17] mentioned that "social institutions encode information. They are credited with making routine decisions, solving routine problems and doing a lot of regular thinking on behalf of individuals." Therefore institutions can be considered as regularized pattern of behavior and they emerge from underlying structures or sets of 'rules in use' [12]. But these socially embedded institutions are not unavoidably better than formal institutions as they allow the risk to uphold and reproduce locally specific configurations of inequity and exclusion [10].

Structure actually specifies the unintentional consequence of our daily practices, which feed back into our everyday practices as unacknowledged conditions of next actions [16]. Structure emphasizes on cultural contexts, social limitations and power dimensions and all these issues influence what rights an individual is able to exercise, how individuals can be more responsible to the environment and how collective decisions will take in a public fora [18]. Hence individual's capability, and their action in appropriate way of doing anything is just not a matter of individuals own choice rather it depends on their conscious and unconscious negotiation over culture, and socially embedded institution, position of individuals with diverse social identity, social interactions among different agents and the perception by others of them. At this point, entitlement can be seen as outcome of negotiation among social actors [12].

### III. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method and qualitative data are used to conduct this study. The advantage of the qualitative research is it can capture profound understanding of human attitudes regarding the research problem and so the researcher can interpret people's behavior through their own subjective lens of perception, which may help to present a narrative description of people's view and opinions about their experiences, attitudes and beliefs and interactions. The present study aims to understand the perceptions and the expectations of the respondents towards the co-management, and to find out their complaints and explore related multiple and contested complexities that they have already experienced in involving the decision-making process. The study purposively selects 1 Resource Management Organization (RMO), which controlled the permanent sanctuary in the Hail haor, named Baikka beel and the buffer zones. The study also selects 2 Resource User Groups (RUGs) that worked under a Federation of Resource User Group (FRUG). Consistent with the criteria of the research, Baruna Ward and Hazipur Ward under Kalapur Union selected because the RMO office and RUG members are staying there.

Both of the informal in-depth interview and observation method employed in order to get the views and insights of co-management from different angles. Informal in-depth interview were taken from RUG members, from women and personnel from Centre for Natural Resources Studies (CNRS). For the purpose of the study a focus group discussion (FGD) was also held by selecting 10 RUG members from two different areas: 5 from Boruna ward and another 5 from Hazipur Ward. These RUG members selected in relation to who are now a member of the executive body and general body of resource management organization, who are excluded and who are no longer a member of resource management organization. In order to select those members snowball sampling method was employed. Each FGD was continued for 1.45 hours. The FGD was recorded through voice recorder and transcribed entirely. In some cases interviews cannot be recorded due to the restrictions from the interviewee but their answers were written down. Later transcribing the interviews, all the materials were coded and categorized based on the research question. Additionally, this study also uses secondary

material like peer-reviewed journal, newsletters, and research papers to complement data on that wetland area, especially in regard to get prior information about the objectives and the process of co-management.

### IV. CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY: CO-MANAGEMENT IN HAIL HAOR

This case study examines the complexities that arise in the process of involving local community in the decision-making arena under co-management framework. Here the case is assessed against four critical domains: project planners view towards involving local community in the co-management process, perceptions of the community about participating in the decision-making process to conserve their resources, how the community exercises their agency and the scope of the community to participate and exert their voice in the decision-making process.

#### A. Policy Context

Bangladesh has experienced different wetland management regime and its implications on the marginalized fishing community. The Bangladesh floodplains and wetlands have been divided up into over 12000 state owned water estates [19]. Since 1950, the history of administrative and legislative measures bears inconsistency and dilemma in wetland management policies of the government that could not contribute to develop into effective participatory institution at the resource user level in the wetland area [20]. In order to ensure fishing rights to genuine fishers Ministry of Labor (MOL) introduced licensing system in 1973, restricted leasing system in 1980, and New Fisheries Management policy in 1986. But all these systems and efforts to empower fishing community failed to leave any space for poor fishermen. Continuous shortcomings in institutional capacity and policies the actual benefit moved towards the influential fishermen or some rich moneylenders [21] and contributed to grow a class of rent seeking powerful non-fishers who managed to procure the license and created a type of "Patron-client" relationship where real fishers lost their traditional access [20]. The continuous policy failure triggered the state wetland management policy to move towards decentralization and transferring the management authority to various institutions: Union Parishad (Local government), Upazila (Sub-district), District and Divisional administration, department and fisheries.

The study was conducted in Hail Haor, which is a deeply flooded basin, positioned in north-east part in Bangladesh. In the Hail haor, Management of Aquatic and Community Husbandry (MACH) project has established community-based co-management project in 1998. The project was supported by USAID and the Government of Bangladesh and implemented by CNRS, Winrock International, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS), and CARITAS Bangladesh linking with Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock and Department of Fisheries [22]. MACH project aims to improve the livelihoods of the poor wetland users, to conserve the resources in a sustainable manner and to empower the local community by involving them in the decision-making process. In order to do these the project implementers takes stapes to

categorize proper management interventions through participatory method, implement those strategies to conserve the resources. Connecting community development and wetland management had seen as the way forward for the formation of self-sustaining economies in the wetland area and to fulfil the objectives of conservation. In an attempt to achieve development and conservation together MACH project formed and divided the roles and responsibilities between 8 Resource Management Organizations (RMO) and 5 Federation of Resource User Groups (FRUG). In 2000, MACH project leased out some water bodies as reserved for those 8 Resource Management Organizations without competitive tendering.

In the Hail Haor, RMOs are voluntary bodies that are registered with the Social Welfare Department. The organizational structure consists of general committee and executive committee. Executive committee holds the right to prepare and execute best management practices for wetland conservation. As part of this process the committee entails a number of activities e.g. fund collection and its proper utilization, personnel recruitment, workload distribution, taking decisions in order to disapprove membership from either executive committee or general committee, or to co-opt any member to fill-up that vacant post. In contrast general committee reserves the right for voting and to participate in the yearly meeting for discussing the yearly planning activities regarding sanctuary management.

In the studied area, both the operational level rights and collective action right are exercised through diverse activities of RMO on four phases: decision-making phase, organizing phase, monitoring phase, and implementing phase. In decision-making stage, the executive committee of RMO are mainly responsible for planning the year-round activity (e.g. tree plantation, re-excavation of beel and connecting canals, establishing guard sheds), budget preparation, scheme submission and establishing fishery rules and regulation for conserving the Hail Haor area (e.g. establishing fishing sanctuary, ban on harmful fishing gears, dewatering, bird poaching, fees for fishing, faire harvesting plan, reintroduce rare indigenous fish). At organizing phase, the executive committee organize monthly meeting for identifying appropriate management interventions and arrange rallies, village meetings by the members from general committee. At monitoring stage, their responsibility is to monitor fishing ban periods, whether anybody use the destructive fishing gears, the method of fishing, the catch amount or size of the fishes and collecting tax/toll. At implementation stage, RMO's activities are mainly focused on the management of buffer zone, handover the water bodies as sub-lease, tree plantation, sanctuary protection and maintenance, establishment of seasonal sanctuary, beel protection and recruitment for guarding. In the entire planning activities the general committee members can participate only in implementation stage and in arranging rallies at organizing phase.

#### V. CASE STUDY FINDINGS

The case study findings demonstrated a clear conception on the scope of the community to participate in the decision-making process under co-management framework. In order to

assess community participation it embraces different stakeholders' subjective understanding about participation. It involves program implementer's view towards community involvement in the decision-making phase along with community people's perception regarding participation, the mode of their negotiation, the room of community people to participate in decision-making activities, and freedom of participants to control the conservation and management activities.

##### *A. Project Planners View Regarding Community Involvement*

For the project planners' participation meant integrating local community in the decision-making process at the root level. At the initial stage the project took the initiative of community consultations where they share the information on the key environmental risks, the upcoming threats and how the community people feel and want to conserve their resources. The project made a platform for the community participants to explain their views regarding the conservation of their resources by themselves. From the project planners view democratic decision-making process can produce the best management practices to conserve their resources. The co-management programme affirmed that involving local community in the decision-making process will sufficiently create a sense of responsibility and ownership of that community. This sense of responsibility will influence to establish a social network to motivate their community, and enhance others to co-operate. Thus the project implementers hold the idea that participation is a motivation process. Through this process henceforward the community will be knowledgeable enough to carry out similar type of project by confirming their incapability that exists at present. This is illustrated in the following quotation given by the personnel from CARITAS Bangladesh

“At the outset of the MACH project the resource management organization formed by taking 10% member from elite group, 60% members from federation of resource user group, and 30% from other professions in the community. We envisioned developing a system whereby different groups of people can share their views regarding how they themselves want to conserve the resources. In this way they can understand the importance of conserving their resources, generate best management practices, share their experiences with their community people and motivate their community to involve in this conservation process.”

##### *B. Community People's Perception Regarding Participation*

Regarding why people participate in co-management process and how they participate in decision-making process a number of similar and dissimilar viewpoints were approached alternatively. In the studied area, the co-management process introduced when wetlands are completely grabbed by the leaseholders and confronted to critical environmental degradation. The poor wetland community was in that position that they have no access right into the wetland area, which underpins them to negotiate with uneven conditions imposed by the leaseholders. At this critical juncture the issue of

conserving wetland resources in a sustainable way, ensure sustainable livelihood for the wetland community and provide a secure access for the community are articulated as the key concerns to the studied community by themselves.

To answer the question of what are the reasons behind the participation in co-management, a similar expression and understanding was observed from the selected participants. People in the studied area welcome co-management process because the program gives them the essence to get access into the wetland and manage their wetland resources in a sustainable way by employing local knowledge through them. It left an impression that the community people will be empowered and can take part in the decision-making process through participating in co-management program. Alternatively the community also has greater interest to conserve their resources. It's not only the reason to get access but the wetland community have an acute concern about critical environmental degradation, and can identify the upcoming threat on their livelihoods and the cost they have to bear due to extinction of the fish species and reducing the fish production. This is illustrated in the following quote from a participant of resource user group:

“At past the Hail haor started to lose its own characteristics. It was completely grabbed by the leaseholders who repeatedly applied dewatering method. We have no restrictions in fishing activities so we deliberately used harmful fishing gears at that time. Moreover, due to siltation most of the canals were blocked. Fish production was repeatedly decreased. The situation was so bad that the poor people in this area were forced to switch their occupation from fishing. At that time the personnel from CARITAS motivated us to stop fishing in this undisciplined way. They said they will give us some loan and training to start alternative livelihoods to reduce the extra pressure at the time of khora (dry season)”.

People in the studied area found receiving loan and joining in the alternative activities as a basis to sufficiently reduce the pressure on fisheries stock and stable them financially. This will work as a gate-way to access into the beel area. So they will no longer dependent on the leaseholders. A member from RUG mentioned

“They said now you have no right in the wetland and you cannot get access, if we give back to you then what do you think? We appreciated their ideas. They told to select our representatives who will manage the beel in a best way so that we can harvest at the monsoon”.

Participants mentioned that they selected their representatives in the way- who is the most respectable person in their community and who have a better connection with local government officials. Because they have the expectation that those representatives can manage their wetland in a better way, maintain the communication and share all the conservation and management decision, problems and prospects with their nominators. So at the time of interview when the question was asked on their representatives attitudes, their work ethic, how they communicate with community people, participants expressed their concern about their expectation and dissatisfaction regarding their representative's

attitudes. They conveyed clear ambiguities on them whom they selected for establishing their fishing right failed to ensure the community right in getting access, and to stop environmental degradation. Both of these issues are now articulated as a key concern by the community themselves. At the time of interview a member from RUG said,

“When Government declared Baikka beel as permanent sanctuary, imposed restrictions on harvesting from the permanent sanctuary and handed over the management plan to the resource management organization, we then selected our representatives in the RMO so that they can manage the Hail Haor. We expected our user group members who are now the part of RMO can talk on behalf of us and also communicate and share all the decisions with us. But when they joined in this organization, they have changed their behavior”.

The difference that the participants expressed between their expectation and dissatisfaction bring the research focus to deal with power differentials and structural aspects. In this respect, Cleaver [5] mentioned that structural placement not only shapes the ability to exercise agency but also it able to shape the norms of articulation of a person. During fieldwork it is found that participants from RUG, who are now a member of RMO, they were talking about their conscious negotiation with uneven situation. They possess the ideology that as they are from the user group and positioned as a member so this will be viable for them to negotiate with uneven situations and accept the domination. They think their conscious negotiation and muteness against illegal activities will stabilize their position in the organization. In this position they consciously negotiate but unconsciously motivated by the structural aspects which positioned them as a user group and shape their thinking pattern from the angle of a subordinate position. Moreover, an attitude of opportunisms reinforces the state of conscious negotiation and the process of subordination. A participant, mentioned

“It is true that we make rules for not to employ dewatering method. But what happen actually? When we get the sub-lease we first employ dewatering process. We show the logic behind re-excavation. Some of us never support it but the situation is neither you can tolerate nor can say anything. On the other hand in order to get sub-lease we have to give an extra charge to the management committee. This extra amount depends on the size of the beel and the value of its fishes. Now it is not possible for me to take solely the decision for not to employ dewatering, we have other members who will not agree with my decision. We are not financially solvent and so it often very tough for us to arrange floating lease money. Sometimes we have to borrow money. We know dewatering is harmful, it causes extinction of rare fish species but what can we do, it is profitable in one sense, we can get a huge amount of fish and by selling them we can get back the sub-lease money”.

Some participants underscored regional variances, a crucial aspect in the case of participation in the decision-making process. During FGD, some participants in the RUG, who are from Baruna ward, discuss about their lack of participation and role in decision-making process in a different manner.

They point out lack of participation is a cause that constraint them to exert their voice. From their view point their lack of participation is a consequence of the hidden strategy of the influential members of RMO. A participant of the of RUG said,

“Baikka beel is a permanent sanctuary, which is managed mostly by the members of Hazipur ward. We had 3 RUG members, named Zoad Mia, Akmol Mia, and Kamaruddin in the Borogangina RMO. Out of 3 members now only 1 member exists in the Borogangina RMO. He is the son of Akmol Mia. He got the position as his father become aged. Zoad Mia and Kamaruddin also were in the Borogangina RMO. But the executive committee exempted them by applying unfair policy. Now in Zoad Mia’s position the executive committee took other persons from Hazipur ward on their own interest. If you do not have more members then how can you convey your opinion and how can you informed about their decision?”

The participants mentioned “there is none who will monitor this mismanagement and enquiry this”.

During the fieldwork, information regarding the dismissed resource management organization members was collected from the president of RMO. He informed about the two members whom they dismissed because of violating organization rules that was clearly mentioned in their constitution. Consequently, those exempted members were interviewed regarding their participation and role in decision-making activities. In this respect, one participant explained his incidents in the following way,

“It’s a common practice at the time of selection or election that if you are not supporting the present ruling group they will take revenge on you by several ways after the election. In my case, after the election the elected body gave me the monitoring responsibility along with other persons from their side. One day as part of duty when we went to sanctuary to monitor the surrounding situation that time they sent a person along with a fish of that sanctuary. That person offered me to take that fish. I know the rule of sanctuary and so didn’t agree with his offers. But at that time of our conversation the other members came to us and they caught me as a thief and exempted me from RMO. It was completely pre-planned”.

Another participant who is former member in resource management organization, relates his experience on this issue in a different way

“I was the member of Borogangina RMO, but I raised my voice regarding some malpractices in sanctuary management. At that time they did not tell me anything, whether I was right or wrong. Suddenly I got the letter of from the executive committee of RMO, where they mentioned I dismissed due not to present in the monthly meeting. They said they called me on my mobile to attend the meeting. But I didn’t receive any call from them. According to them as I have missed three meetings, they dismissed me”.

From the participants point of view exemption is a process or a strategy that the organizational committee used for their self-interest. MACH project set the vision that RMO will work

together with community people. But eventually RMO strategically structured their organization in their own form to acquire benefit not only from the resources but also from their extensive social network. In this respect, one participant who is working with CNRS from the beginning of the MACH project, said,

“At the onset of the MACH project it was decided to take 10% elite so that they can resist the external influence and local politics. But now they not only maintain relationship with political leaders but fully captured all the positions of office bearers”.

However, the participants suggested that their participation in managing permanent sanctuary, temporary sanctuary and in other water bodies that are controlled by the RMO is narrowly identified. They thought that they are not well-informed about the decisions taken for beel management. During FGD one participant from Baruna ward said

“RMO members decide who will get the lease to do the agricultural activities or fishing. We informed about the lease later. We have no idea how to take part in leasing. From Baruna ward we have lot of eligible people but have no system to deliver voice”.

For the participants who are from Baruna ward, the issue of participating in decision-making process should be viewed in the context of the social relations and from the location of resources. They feel that location of specific resource is the center of all power. Some participants mentioned that as the Borogangina RMO office positioned in Hazipur ward and close to the Baikka beel so it is easy for them to control it in their own way through own people from their area. One of the participants from Baruna ward stated

“I have applied several times to be a member of general committee, but they denied by showing me the excuse of huge members in the committee. But if the executive committee wishes, they can take me as a member; they think they got it (RMO) through inheritance”.

### *C. Women Participation In Wetland Management*

An additional insight in this case study is to focus on the scope of women to participate in decision-making activities. In the wetland area, two different context works, which hindered women to exercise their agency more frequently in the public space, one is societal norms that shaped the behavior of women and another is their willingness to participate. In order to explore the aforementioned issue questions were asked both to male and female participants. Regarding women participation in wetland management a male participant mentioned

“In our society women never goes to beel for fishing. If they wish to take a small pond just beside their house as a lease, we encourage them. In the general committee meeting, we asked them whether they want to say something or not because they always stay inside the house. So naturally they will feel shy to talk over in the public place”.

When question was asked to women participants about their perceptions to participate in beel management participants answered from the perspective of gender division of work and from social interiorized perspective. A women participant said

“In the meeting they ask us if we have any comment regarding their decision we can say. We always agree with their decision. Because in our society all the works like fishing, livestock rearing has always done by our male members. From our childhood, I never go to the Haor area. So how can I say something on that issue? Besides this in our society there is no custom to talk in public place over a male person”.

Another women participant placed her ideology regarding participation from the viewpoint of motivation where she said “Usually I get the invitation to attend in the general meeting but most of the time I cannot attend because I have two small kids. I must take care of them. Moreover, attending this meeting is not financially helpful for me. As it is not financially profitable so my husband also discourages me to go there”.

She further added the time constraints and the distance of RMO office with family responsibility and financial benefit. Concerning this motivation to participate Cleaver [10] mentioned social norms can come in secondary place if it relate with economic rationality.

## VI. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the case study is to assess community participation in the decision-making process, so it holds different stakeholders subjective understandings about participation and try to find out how power explicitly works and influence the process. The case study findings exhibits that community participation is selective and instrumental. Broader community participation related with social structure, personal relation, regional constraints and social embedded institutions.

The case study findings explores that the community people are completely concern about the power dynamics that operates in the leasing process of the water body. Community's insights on the MACH project's activities was shaped from their past experiences of losing historical fishing right and they found the project activities as a way to improve their livelihoods and get access into the water body. At the onset of the MACH project, community people selected their members in the executive committee because they have the expectation for better management of the Hail haor and they thought their desire can be ensured by involving them in the resource management. They perceived the understanding that those representatives capable enough to bargain with every stakeholders and can truly represent their needs, interest. This is the position where they are not completely powerless because they participate in the process. The case study found that negotiation in order to manage the environment of the hail haor, to get access, and to compliance with rules all are intensely shaped by social norms-the norms of social respect, confidence on the aptitude of certain people to bargain and negotiate, and the right way of doing things, which Cleaver identified as “moral-ecological rationality” [5]. In the study area, it was found that this moral-ecological rationality indeed shape people's agency unintentionally from the point of trustworthiness and confidence that eventually constrained the local people to get involved in the decision-making process and encourage the local community to comply with the rules

of resource use. This moral-ecological rationality simultaneously facilitated power regeneration to the management committee, influence individual agency and eventually it initiates not only social exclusion but also facilitates the process of accepting subordination of the user community. The case study findings demonstrate that participation of the user community depends mainly on how the participant accept different situation and accordingly act on it. Their limited space to participate in the decision-making process generates strong feelings of powerlessness not only in community participants but to the user community and regulates their subjective understanding in the way that their actions and voice will not create any difference.

Furthermore, regional constraints are one of the highly emotive issues in the context of community participation in wetland management. The findings suggest that absence of system that can sufficiently ensures transparency and accountability to the user community actually facilitates to manipulate the constitution and constrained other RMO members to exert their agency. It is observed that executive committee can disapprove the membership by manipulating the constitution and can employ a personnel of their self-interest. Employing own person in the executive body, work as a *hidden transcript*. That is why some members who structurally placed in a subordinate position within the organizational set up consciously negotiate with uneven situation. This placement of dominant and subordinate within an organizational structure shapes the conduct of the people that how they behave in relation to the perceptions of the dominant, and how they can eloquent in public forum. They feel not to confront and disobey their existing working relationship for their future stability. Moreover, a common interest regarding access to the resource either legally or illegally exercised within this subordination and domination. Jentoft [1] mentions the problem of co-management at collective level is *opportunisms* that can be mentioned by the well-known metaphor “*Fox in the hens' house*”. At collective level co-management may also suffer from the opportunisms where user group with a formal position within the resource management system will be involved in taking substantial shares of benefits and misappropriate the trust that they have been granted as protectors of the resources [1]. For this reason, the local community along with RUG members cannot make trust on the management activities of the RMO.

Another very important finding of this case study is in the male dominating society, it is hard to make a space as women due to social norms. Social norms largely influenced women's scope to participate in decision-making activities. The findings suggest that women participation in the context of wetland management is few and controlled by politically and socially. In most cases women participants do not face any problem in attending the meeting but social embeddedness constrain their agency to talk over the male respondent. They do not feel unhappy or dishonor because for them this is a routine practice and regular phenomenon. They act with this situation very consciously. They internalize themselves with this hegemonic norm of the society. Cleaver [10] finds out this position of non-participation as a “rational strategy and an unconscious practice that embedded in routine, social norms and the acceptance of the status quo”.

The study suggests an important consideration that for the women public space is socially constructed whereas private space is influenced through their family and by their conscious and rational attitudes. In the entire management, process women have the opportunity to participate but delivering their voice in decision-making activities controlled by existing social norms, perceptions of the male dominating society who do not consider women opinion is imperative.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In order to manage and conserve the wetland resources community involvement in decision-making process is necessary. But the above discussion makes it vibrant that the issue is not so simple and straightforward and therefore to grasp the complexities a thoughtful understanding about the community, the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of participation, socially embedded institutions, and most importantly power relations need to be addressed. The case study showed that how power works explicitly and shapes the attitudes of the participants. It demonstrated that the process of subordination or accepting domination in the context of participation ultimately creates a powerlessness feeling among the subordinate user community and facilitates them to act accordingly on dominators hidden strategy. An important part of participation is sharing benefit. It is found from the study that like the participation this area is narrowly identified and restricted to some community people rather than the whole community. All the aforementioned issues materialize due to lack of accountability, transparency and lack of monitoring system to look after the mismanagements. To improve the exiting situation the process of ensuring accountability and transparency need to be addressed in the ongoing and future projects.

Another vital part of this study is to focus on women participation. Women are the essential part of a community. In order to increase the involvement of the women into the decision-making process a gender perspective needs to be brought into all stages of the project cycle. This process will eventually help both men and women to recognize their views regarding resource use and conservation, their relevant importance in conservation practices. Most importantly, in the context of wetland resource management it will not wise to consider participation as only a method rather attention should be given to the nature and form of participation.

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