

Co-management Organizations: A Way to Facilitate Sustainable Management of the Sundarbans Mangrove Forests of Bangladesh

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Abstract : The Sundarbans is the largest single tract of mangrove forest in the world. This is located in the southwest corner of Bangladesh. This is a unique ecosystem which is a great breeding and nursing ground for a great biodiversity. It supports the livelihood of about 3.5 million coastal dwellers and also protects the coastal belt and inland areas from various natural calamities. Historically, the management of the Sundarbans was controlled by the Bangladesh Forest Department following top-down approach without the involvement of local communities. Such fence and fining-based blue-print approach was not effective to protect the forest which caused Sundarbans to degrade severely in the recent past. Fifty percent of the total tree cover has been lost in the last 30 years. Therefore, local multi-stakeholder based bottom-up co-management approach was introduced at some of the parts of the Sundarbans in 2006 to improve the biodiversity status by enhancing the protection level of the forest. Various co-management organizations were introduced under co-management approach where the local community people could actively involve in various activities related to the management and welfare of the Sundarbans including the decision-making process to achieve the goal. From this backdrop, the objective of the study was to assess the performance of co-management organizations to facilitate sustainable management of the Sundarbans mangrove forests. The qualitative study followed face-to-face interview to collect data using two sets of semi-structured questionnaires. A total of 40 respondents participated in the research that was from eight villagers under two forest ranges. 32 representatives from the local communities as well as 8 official representatives involved in co-management approach were interviewed using snowball sampling technique. The study shows that the co-management approach improved governance system of the Sundarbans through active participation of the local community people and their interactions with the officials via the platform of co-management organizations. It facilitated accountability and transparency system to some extent through following some formal and informal rules and regulations. It also improved the power structure of the management process by fostering local empowerment process particularly the women. Moreover, people were able to learn from their interactions with and within the co-management organizations as well as interventions improved environmental awareness and promoted social learning. The respondents considered good governance as the most important factor for achieving the goal of sustainable management and biodiversity conservation of the Sundarbans. The success of co-management planning process also depends on the active and functional participation of different stakeholders including the local communities where co-management organizations were considered as the most functional platform. However, the governance system was also facing various challenges which resulted in barriers to the sustainable management of the Sundarbans mangrove forest. But still there were some members involved in illegal forest operations and created obstacles against sustainable management of the Sundarbans. Respondents recommended greater patronization from the government, financial and logistic incentives for alternative income generation opportunities with effective participatory monitoring and evaluation system to improve sustainable management of the Sundarbans.

Keywords : Bangladesh, co-management approach, co-management organizations, governance, Sundarbans, sustainable management

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