



# COMMUNITY BASED FISHERIES MANAGEMENT CAPTURING THE BENEFITS

## BACKGROUND

*The unequal distribution of wealth and power in rural Bangladesh makes it difficult for the poorer members of society, including women to access natural resources such as fisheries.*

*Over a ten year period, the Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) project has successfully established access rights for many poor fishers to water bodies from which they were previously excluded. One of the main challenges faced by the project has been the resolution of disputes between the new user groups and the former users, often the rich, politically powerful 'rural elite'.*

*This brief focuses on the approaches developed by the project to address the power struggle which faces community based organisations (CBOs) when taking control of valuable natural resources.*

State owned waters in Bangladesh are usually managed under a commercial, revenue-focused leasing system controlled by the Ministry of Land (MoL). Poor fishers are effectively excluded from the best fisheries as they cannot afford to pay for the leases.

The Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) project, implemented by the Department of Fisheries (DoF), the Government of Bangladesh, in partnership with the WorldFish Center and 11 NGOs, is an action research project which has developed a series of community based fisheries management approaches (fisher-led, community-led and women-led) for ensuring equitable access to fisheries resources for community based management groups.

The CBFM project, the largest of its type in Bangladesh, has over a 10 year period expanded its remit from 14 water bodies in the first phase to 116 water bodies in a second phase scheduled to phase out in 2007. The CBFM project, together with a range of other similar donor funded and Bangladesh Government funded interventions will lead to clear recommendations for management of the more than 12,000 publicly owned water bodies and the many privately owned wetlands in Bangladesh in ways which will improve the livelihoods of some of Bangladesh's 68.9 million rural poor<sup>1</sup>.

1. Source: Unlocking the Potential, National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction, PRSP, Page xi, Revised on 12 January 2005.





## LESSONS LEARNT

### 1. Transferring User Rights

Under the CBFM project, the responsibility for managing project water bodies was transferred from the Ministry of Land (MoL) to the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (MoFL)/Department of Fisheries (DoF) which then issued leases to community groups under the CBFM project. This was a slow process, because of administrative delays by the MoL and because influential leaseholders often used their political connections and legal actions in the courts to attempt to keep their exclusive access to the fisheries. With the assistance of CBFM partner NGO the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA), the project helped the community groups to fight these court cases. In the majority of the cases, the courts have found in favour of the community groups. (Out of 27 cases already heard, 13 have been won, 13 are likely to be won and only one is considered as a 'hopeless case').

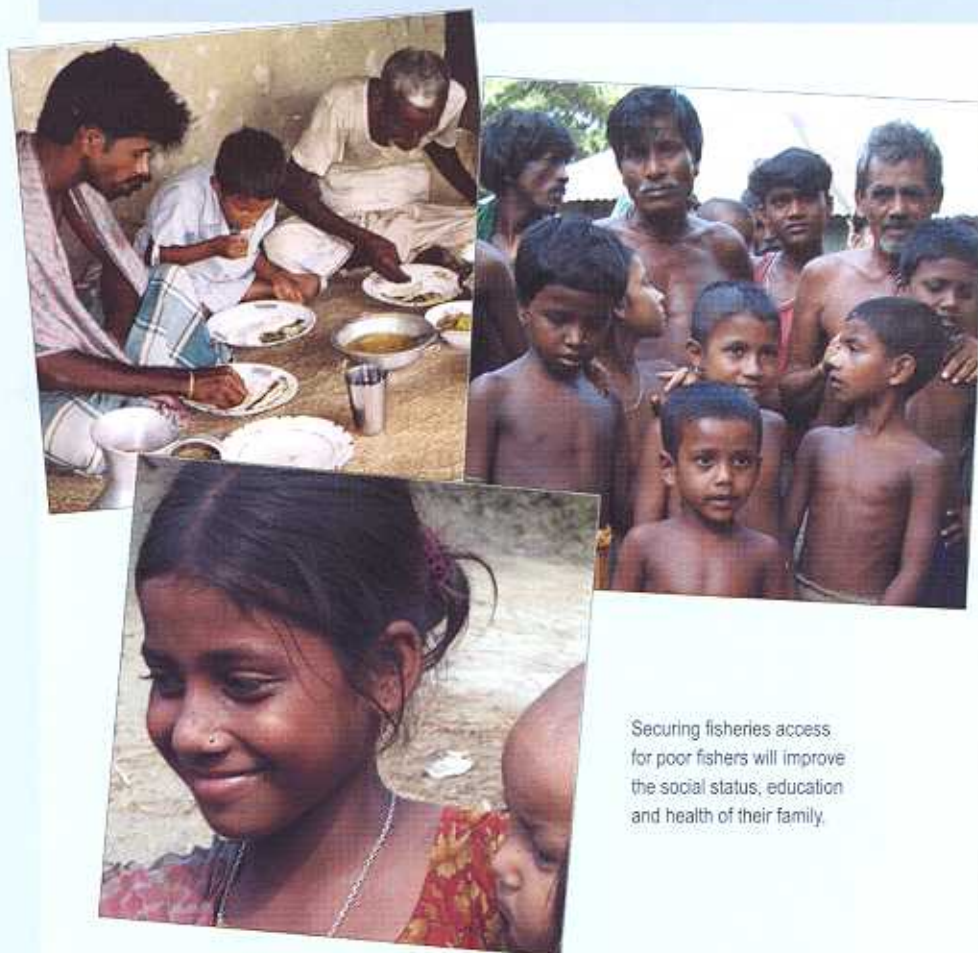
The likelihood of conflict over the transfer of user rights depends on local circumstances. However, there tend to be fewer problems with closed and semi-closed *beels*<sup>2</sup>, where management has generally been in community control for some time than with open beels and rivers which have tended to be controlled by non-fishermen and traditionally been considered as open access.

The exception to this is particularly productive fisheries. Opposition to the transfer of responsibility has been very strong in the closed beels Hatina-Moral (Akhaura-Brahmanbaria) and Nalia-Korma (Karimganj-Kishoreganj).

2. Depressions in the floodplain forming lakes, often varying in size with the season.

### 2. Affordable Lease Fees

There is little point in transferring user rights to community based groups unless they can afford the annual operating costs, one of which is the lease fee paid for most of the water bodies under the project. The CBFM project has been able to help by lobbying for major lease fee reductions in particular water bodies (see box) and by changing/clarifying government policies. The former policy of increasing lease fees by 10% each year has been dropped as has the 15% VAT normally applied on leases. The project is currently working on abolishing the 3% income tax charged on the lease fee of the project water bodies.



Securing fisheries access for poor fishers will improve the social status, education and health of their family.

Betaldoba Sarbamangal beel in Katiadi Upazila of Kishoreganj district was handed over to the CBFM project in 2001, however the lease fees were too high to be borne by a user group of poor fishers. At one stage in 2004, this water body was dropped from the project by DoF because the lease had not been paid. Following strong representations by the CBFM community group to the government at the Deputy Commissioner and Ministry levels complaining that the fishermen could not afford to pay the lease, the Ministry of Land (MoL) reduced the lease value from over Tk 700,000 (equivalent to £5,500 or \$ 10,000) to Tk 300,000 (equivalent to £ 2,500 or \$ 4,000) in early 2006.



### 3. NGOs and Community Groups

Partner organisations for the project include 9 NGOs (114 sites) and the DoF (2 sites), which were responsible for establishing community groups and helping them to become self-managing, independent entities.

This approach has been successful in most cases. By the end of project, over 23,000 CBFM project primary beneficiaries will be operating independently of the project. The Community Based Organisations (CBOs), have been helped by the partner NGOs and DoF through training, exchange visits, social mobilisation, revolving loan funds for alternative income generation and loans for water body leasing, fish stocking, operations and management.

The key role played by local NGOs in the project highlighted the need for well motivated and highly skilled staff. Contrasting experiences with the same partner NGO illustrate this point. In Chapandah and Atrai *beels* in North-West Bangladesh, the CBOs have been very pleased with one of our partner NGOs role as it provided support not only in CBO management, but also in other areas of community support - micro-credit, Non Formal Primary Education (NFPE), health, sanitation. On the other hand, in Nuruil *beel* (Bogra), the same NGO failed to provide adequate support to the CBO to address local conflicts between two villages both of which severely impacted project implementation in the area.



The pollution in Nandinar *beel* not only posed a threat to the resources and the livelihood of fishers, but to their health as well.

In Nandinar *beel*, Rangpur district, a chemical factory was discharging distillery effluent into it. This was threatening the fishery resources and the role of the *beel* as a sanctuary. The project CBO with the support of DoF staff, the partner NGO BRAC, the project's legal assistance provider BELA, the media communication partner FemCom and the local Member of Parliament, Mr. Nur Mohammad pressurised the factory to stop polluting the beel. This resulted in the factory installing an appropriate effluent treatment system. Not only that, the project CBO on their own initiative built an embankment to save their water body from pollution.



*Katha* is a fishing device made by placing tree branches in water bodies to attract fish which are then caught in an enclosing net. It causes conflict between small-scale fishers and *Katha* owners (mostly non-fishers) regarding who is entitled to catch fish.



### 4. Local Networks

Different NGOs adopted different approaches to local networking, often determined by larger programme approaches and existing capacities for work in the natural resources sector. CBOs were grouped together to form either Beel Management Committees (BMCs), or River Management Committees (RMCs). Upazila (sub-district) level committees have also played a crucial supporting role for the CBOs.

Conflicts over access to the *beels*, area demarcation, the use of destructive fishing methods and the abstraction of water for irrigation were the most common problems encountered in the project water bodies. In most cases, the *Beel* or River Management Committees were able to help to resolve these conflicts with the support of DoF and local government staff.

There has been good success in securing wider access in riverine project water bodies through the establishment of community-based management approaches even under the systems where no lease has been paid. A good example is Tetulia river in the South-Western Bhola district. As a traditional practice, the local power brokers have been collecting forced payments from poor fishers, particularly those fishing illegally. However, with the establishment of the CBFM project, the River Management Committee in association with DoF, the Deputy Commissioner (District Administrative Head) and other local stakeholders were able to establish the rights of the poor fishers, freeing them of these malpractices. Another example is Narshimpur nadi under Khaliajuri Upazila in Netrokona, where the local Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (Sub-district Administrative Head) helped the River Management Committee to establish their rights.

There have also been management problems in some water bodies as well. In Shapla and Hurol *beels*, both in Nasirnagar-Brahmanbaria, the management committees became dominated by non-fishers and former leaseholders who were unwilling to adopt project approaches. Unfortunately these water bodies, along with Hatina Mural (Akhaura-Brahmanbaria) and Mara *beels* (Fulpur-Mymensingh) had to be dropped from the project in 2005.



## 5. Regional and National CBO Networks

A regional networking system has been introduced to encourage lesson sharing between CBOs. This has proved to be a popular development, and has led to the election of regional committees with financial contributions from member CBOs towards their administrative costs. While the logical extension to this is a national community based fisheries network, this will only happen if the CBOs feel that it is necessary. That is, the drive for this must be from the grass-roots level rather than being seen to be a project intervention.

### KEY MESSAGE

Establishing access to fisheries for community based groups of fishers is complex and time consuming. Through a flexible and collaborative approach involving NGOs, DoF staff, local government staff and other interested stakeholders, the CBFM project successfully managed to establish legitimate community control over the management of 97% of 116 project water bodies. Difficulties have been faced in this process. However local partnerships have played a crucial role in overcoming set-backs. The approach is suitable for replication in government owned and private water bodies all over Bangladesh.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote better coordination between central government and district authorities. This need has been highlighted by delays in transfer of water bodies to the project.
2. Ensure adequate tenure for the user groups. The government should consider extending the lease period for *Jalmohals* (public water bodies) from beyond the current 10 years period allowed for development projects. This creates a greater incentive for implementing sustainable, and not exploitative, management practices.
3. Ensure continued support to *Upazila* (sub-district) and District level DoF staff and UNO/DC, all of which are crucial for sustaining and establishing rights and authority of CBOs.
4. Encourage NGOs to appoint skilled and dedicated field staff for organising fishers from the initial stage of group formation at the water body level.

## Source of Information

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4. The CBFM-2 Communication Workshop Report 2005 (Unpublished), WorldFish Center, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
5. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (1997). *Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*. Ministry of Planning, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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### Produced by



**The WorldFish Center**  
Bangladesh and South Asia Office  
House 22B, Road 7, Block F,  
Banani, Dhaka, Bangladesh  
Phone (+880-2) 881 3250, 881 4624  
Fax (+880-2) 881 1151  
E-mail: worldfish-bangladesh@cgiar.org

### In collaboration with



**The Department of Fisheries**  
Matshya Bhaban (10th Floor)  
Park Avenue, Ramna,  
Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh.  
Tel: (+880-2) 9571696  
Fax: (+880-2) 9571696  
E-mail: cbfm@dhaka.net

### In association with

Banchte Shekha | BELA | BRAC | CARITAS | CNRS | CRED |  
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Text: Malcolm Dickson, Muzaffar Ahmed  
Edited by: Malcolm Dickson  
Coordination: Hillol Sobhan  
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