



Ideals and institutions: Systemic reasons for the failure of a social forestry program in south-west Bangladesh



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ABSTRACT

We explore the contradictions between the ideals and principles of Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) and the local-level institutional processes encountered in their implementation. In particular, we examine the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Social Forestry Program (SFP) in the south-west coastal region of Bangladesh through case studies of two villages in Khulna District. The SFP was a component of the donor-funded Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project (SBCP), intended to improve the livelihoods of poor households and protect the landscape through strip plantations on both sides of the large embankments that surround the farming land in the coastal region. Our findings show the gap between the national and international context in which the SFP was formulated and the realities of the local context in which formal and informal institutions worked to frustrate the achievement of CBNRM ideals. Hence the SFP failed to significantly increase forest cover or improve the livelihoods of the target populations. We document the specific ways in which the SFP deviated from the assumptions of CBNRM. However, we conclude that the problem is systemic, related to the top-down imposition of a supposedly bottom-up process, and not simply a matter of improving project implementation. Thus improving rural livelihoods and natural resource management in complex marginal environments such as south-west coastal Bangladesh will require far more transformative institutional change than can be achieved by donor-initiated project interventions, no matter how worthy the ideals.

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1. Introduction

Bangladesh faces severe problems in forest management. The country has only 2.16 million ha of forest cover or 14% of the surface area (BFD, 2016). Almost half the districts have no recorded forest (Jashimuddin, 2011). Hence forest area per capita is very low (0.009 ha), compared to 0.145 ha for Asia and 0.597 ha globally. Though the rate of deforestation has decreased from 2.1% during 1960–1980 (Chowdhury, 2002) to 0.2% during 1990–2010, it is still higher than the global rate of 0.1% (FAO, 2011), while forest degradation continues. The World Heritage Sundarbans Mangrove Forest in the south-west, accounting for half of reserved forest in Bangladesh, is under pressure from natural and human factors and is a major focus of forest conservation efforts.

The main drivers of deforestation and forest degradation in south-west Bangladesh are population growth, poverty, demand for fuelwood, fodder, and timber, shortage of cultivable land,

industrialization, development interventions, and natural disasters (Ahmed, 2008; Salam et al., 1999; Muhammed et al., 2005; Chowdhury and Hossain, 2011). In this context, the Social Forestry Program (SFP) was introduced nationally in the early 1980s with the twin objectives of promoting active involvement of local people in conserving and replenishing forests and improving the socio-economic situation of the rural poor (Zaman et al., 2011). Social forestry formed a major component of the Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project (SBCP) funded by the Asian Development Bank and other donors in the early 2000s. However, despite considerable funding, the SFP has performed poorly both in implementation and outcomes (Chowdhury, 2004; Muhammed et al., 2008; Jashimuddin and Inoue, 2012).

We investigate reasons why the SFP has failed to increase forest cover or improve the livelihoods of target populations in the south-west coastal zone. The yawning gap between the aims and achievements of the SFP is attributed to a broader disconnection between the context in which such programs are formulated, in which donor agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) seek to impose the ideals of Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), and the context in which they are

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implemented, where formal and informal institutions work to distort and constrain the implementation of these ideals.

However, our intention is not merely to enumerate yet another set of “implementation problems”, to be rectified by further studies and better-planned interventions. Rather, we see the failure of the SFP as an example of a more general development paradox, captured in *Tania Li’s* (2007, 2011) apposite term, “rendering technical”, by which she means “to render problems . . . technical and manageable, and act on them by means of expert prescription” (2011: 117). This process of “rendering technical” obscures the disparity between the ideals of CBNRM projects and the formal and informal institutions in which these projects are inserted. Local institutions may deviate from the ideals in ways which prove intractable to outside intervention.

We first examine the principles and concepts of CBNRM, then juxtapose that with a brief account of the political economy of resource management in Bangladesh, from international to community levels. We then focus on the SFP itself, drawing on research undertaken in two villages in Khulna District in the south-west coastal zone, abutting the Sundarbans. Here the SFP, with funding from the SBCP, focused on establishing strip plantations on coastal embankments to increase tree cover, stabilise embankments, and improve the livelihoods of the poor. We trace the implementation and outcomes of the project in the two villages, examining the roles of the major actors and the ways in which the formal institutions of government, in particular the Forest Department, and the informal institutions governing social and economic relations within the villages combined to frustrate the achievement of social forestry ideals. The concluding section returns to the argument that this is not merely a case of deviating from the CBNRM script but is an illustration of the more general disparity between ideals and institutions in CBNRM projects in developing countries.

2. The paradox of Community-Based Natural Resource Management

Social forestry exemplifies the ideals and concepts of CBNRM, which arose in the 1970s in response to the failures and limitations of top-down, expert-driven approaches to managing, not just forests but land, water, fisheries, and other natural resources (Agrawal, 2001; German et al., 2008; Gibson et al., 2005; Jordan and Volger, 2003; Kellert et al., 2000; Ostrom, 1990; Topp-Jørgensen et al., 2005). Broadly defined,

CBNRM is the management of natural resources under a detailed plan developed and agreed to by all concerned stakeholders. The approach is community-based in that the communities managing the resources have the legal rights, the local institutions, and the economic incentives to take substantial responsibility for sustained use of these resources. Under the natural resource management plan, communities become the primary implementers, assisted and monitored by technical services.¹

The CBNRM approach assumes that local people already use, rely on, and manage natural resources, and are in the best position to conserve them – with external assistance (Dressler et al., 2010). Many national governments, non-government organisations (NGOs), and international agencies have promoted decentralization of natural resource management in the belief that, given secure resource tenure and decision-making authority, local communities depending on natural resources for their livelihoods will manage them sustainably (Agrawal, 2007).

Despite its high ideals, CBNRM has been criticized for systematically failing to achieve its objectives, both with regard to “communities” and “natural resources” (Kellert et al., 2000; Murphree, 2004; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008; Poteete, 2009). Critics argue the approach assumes a simplified notion of “community” as a distinct social group in one geographical location, sharing common cultural characteristics and living in harmony and consensus, thus ignoring the complexity and diversity that typically occurs within local communities in developing and developed countries (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Leach et al., 1999; Li, 1996, 2002; Ribot, 2003). According to Li (2002:267), “CBNRM uses an environmental hook to tie rights to particular forms of identity, social organization, livelihood, and resource management.” In CBNRM projects, community members are identified as “rational resource users”, ignoring their collective identities as farmers, women, elites, and poor (Saunders, 2014). “Stakeholder participation” or “community engagement” is the key strategy intended to empower local communities to manage the resources they depend on, but this local participation typically fails to achieve meaningful social change due to “a failure to engage with issues of power and politics” (Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 237).

In contrast, Cleaver (2002) observes that resource users have multiple identities that are strongly influenced by community norms, values, and social relations. Baynes et al. (2015), reviewing community forestry programs, highlight differences in socio-economic status and gender inequalities, arguing that the subordinate position of poor and disadvantaged community members (particularly women) is systemic. These differences fundamentally affect representation, participation, and access to natural resources (Agrawal, 2001, 2009, 2010; Blaikie, 2006; Sunam and McCarthy, 2010). CBNRM projects are particularly subject to “elite capture”, where privileged members of a community dominate decision-making and gain access to collective benefits at the expense of others (Ribot, 2004). Shackleton et al. (2002: 1) agree that “more powerful actors in communities tend to manipulate devolution outcomes to suit themselves.” There is ample evidence of elite capture of CBNRM projects and limited success in targeting the poorest (Agarwal, 1997; Kumar, 2002; Mansuri and Rao, 2004; Springate-Baginski and Blaikie, 2007).

These contradictions are especially evident in the mode of implementation of CBNRM projects. According to Dörre (2015), the policies and legal frameworks of CBNRM are typically initiated from the top down, with limited attention to local demands and capacities. Though the bottom-up ideal of CBNRM is emphasised, the conventional top-down, rational planning model still dominates implementation (Balint and Mashinya, 2006; Lane, 2006; Lane and McDonald, 2005). Lack of downwardly accountable decentralization is seen as a vital constraint to successful CBNRM (Dörre, 2015; Hickey and Mohan, 2005; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008; Shackleton et al., 2002). According to Saunders (2014), externally-designed community-based institutions need to deal with other institutions or networks of power at different scales, but these are rarely addressed when planning interventions. Berkes (2007) argues that CBNRM efforts cannot be implemented at only one level and that both vertical and horizontal institutional interplay must be considered (see also Tang and Brody, 2009; Tang and Zhao, 2011).

Many of these criticisms imply that the failures of CBNRM are attributable merely to poor understanding and implementation of the ideals. Hence Kellert et al. (2000: 713) conclude from a cross-country review that “effective implementation of [CBNRM] is extraordinarily complex and difficult. We believe its success will be more likely to occur if the challenge of implementation is explicitly acknowledged.” In contrast to the relatively naive assumptions that typically underpin the implementation of CBNRM, they suggest the following be

¹ CBNRM Net http://www.cbnrm.net/resources/terminology/terms_cbnrm.html (accessed 29 February 2016).

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