

GOBESHONA 4

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Building local climate knowledge

Cooperation and conflict over swamp forests in Bangladesh

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Context and structure

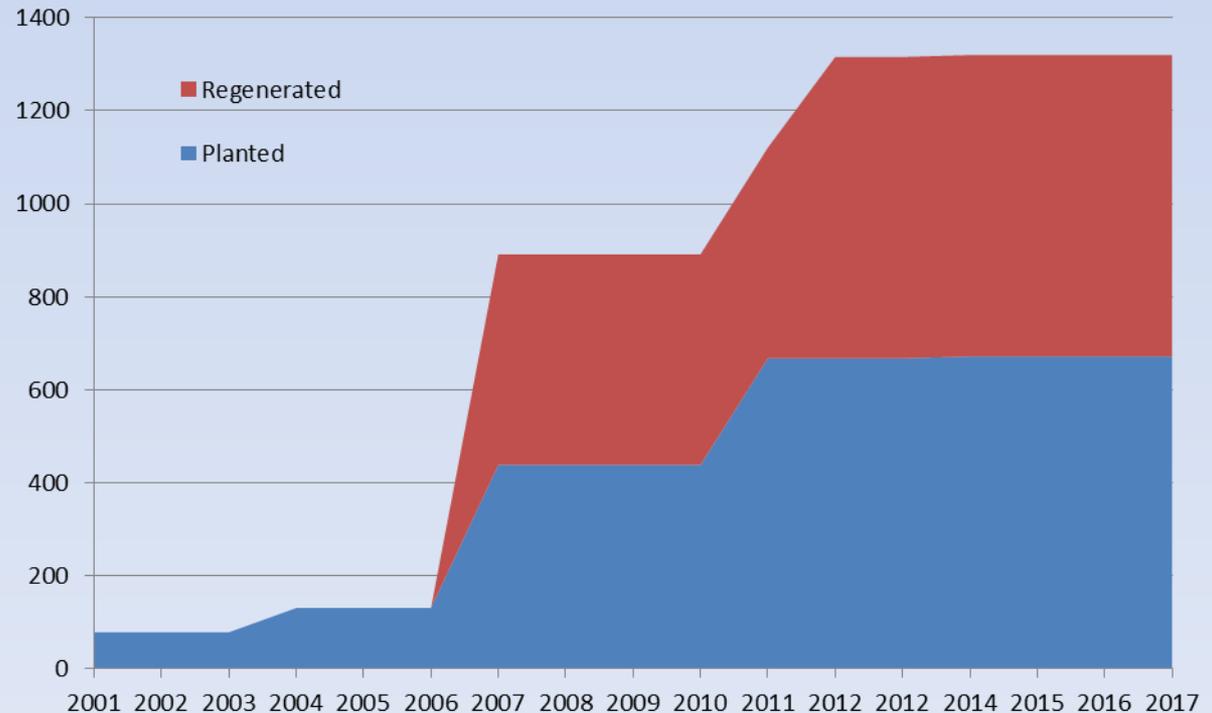
- Freshwater swamp forest of *Hijal* and *Korocho* is unique to the deeply flooded haors of northeast Bangladesh.
- These forests once covered much of the haors, but had been largely cleared and almost disappeared until recent efforts to restore them.
- Swamp forest contributes to climate change mitigation, more resilient ecosystems and fisheries, and protection of villages from waves and floods.
- This paper considers three areas
 - Hakaluki Haor,
 - Sunamganj haors,
 - Ratargul



Hakaluki Haor

- The largest single haor in Bangladesh.
- Before 1950 extensive mature swamp forests on public “kanda” land.
- By 1999 almost all trees had been felled for timber, fuel and brushpiles.
- Became an ECA
- Under various projects CNRS worked with communities (15 Village Conservation Groups) and public lands were planted with hijal and korocho.
- Now has 89 swamp forest patches covering 1320 ha.

Cumulated area (ha) of swamp forest by year of starting in Hakaluki Haor



Action research with 2 VCGs found they:

- Appoint guards to protect newly re-generated trees (funded by projects).
- Ban grazing of cattle and buffaloes in the re-generated forest patches.
- Mark protected area with red flags.
- Closed area to stop fuelwood collection.
- Have continuous surveillance.
- Do not benefit directly.
- Trees and reed-swamp recovering.
- Fish catches improved with flooded trees providing nursing grounds and sanctuaries.

Hakaluki Haor



Hakaluki Haor - conflicts

- Outsiders cut trees.
- Workers of fisheries leaseholders (influentials) cut branches for brushpiles.
- Encroachment for agriculture (lack of demarcation).
- Local administration sympathetic to supporting VCGs protecting swamp forest.
- Attempts to enforce protection using local informal village courts failed as **parts of the area on paper were allocated to landless people for agriculture.**
- CREL tried to have Ministry of Land designate these lands as reserved for conservation but stalled by same issue.
- Lack of formal recognition rests on land status – conflicts ultimately arise from policy gaps and insecure tenure.



Sunamganj swamp forests



- A CNRS study found 59 patches of swamp forest of which 22% were in good condition.
- 63% on state owned land,
- 30% owned collectively by extended family,
- 2% individually owned
- 5% partly on state partly private lands

Two contrasting swamp forest patches considered here:

- **Rahimapur-Hariharpur** - 44 ha leased by NGO for community “social forestry” approach
- **Fenarbak** – 25 ha – traditional elite-religious institutions

Sunamganj - Fenerbak

Fenarbak

- A traditional “commons” over which the villagers appear collectively to have secure tenure – mostly *esmali land* but now converted to *waaf*.
- Five villages with several hundred households, but dominated by five lineages with 71 households.
- These influential extended families are in constant minor disputes, yet they have conserved the forest without project or NGO intervention.
- A committee based on the five families was formed for swamp forest management and then split it in the names of mosque and village development.
- Committees and decisions are relatively accountable and transparent.
- Forest dependence is low and they have other fund sources, which also limits pressure.
- Compliance with rules against tree felling is good.
- Relies on current generation of elders.

Sunamganj – Rahimapur-Hariharpur

Past

- Khas land – since 1961 district administration issues 5-year leases to exploit.
- Like many patches of mature swamp forest it was harvested by the leaseholders for branches, but they did not allow regeneration or plant saplings.
- Tree number dropped from about 25,000 in 1940s to 953 in 2008.

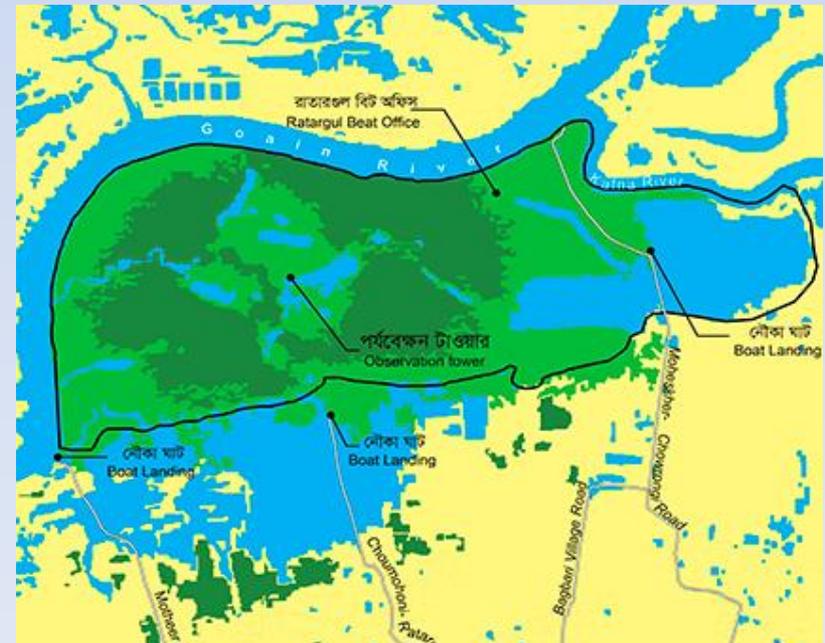


Intervention

- CNRS leased it in 2009 for 10 years and formed CBO.
- Planted saplings, protected and over 16,000 trees surviving.
- Helped the community set limits on harvesting branches.
- Encroachment for agriculture is declining with clear lease rights.
- Benefits – protection of village from wave action, fish catches reported to have increased; but under social forestry trees may be felled after 10 years.

Ratargul Swamp Forest

- 26 km N of Sylhet
- 204 ha of Forest Department land
- Only significant patch of mature swamp forest under FD
- Declared as Ratargul Special Biodiversity Conservation Area in 2015



Ratargul Swamp Forest

- After heavy exploitation, most of forest regenerated since 1980s.
- The scope to exploit trees in Ratargul is limited by formal protection of this government forest.
- Parts of the area have been planted with murtha and cane.
- Formal protection has failed to prevent encroachment to build private fish ponds.





Ratargul Swamp Forest

- Tourism infrastructure has been strongly contested by some environmental groups.
- Three local villages earn significant amounts from hiring boats to visitors to go into the flooded forest.



Ratargul: conflict issues

- Local elites grabbing land for cultivation and for aquaculture.
- Poorly delineated boundary.
- Grazing in dry season – 1500 cattle.
- Illegal tree felling – last 5 years 30 clashes between Forest Department and tree thieves
- Recent poorly planned and implemented infrastructure (e.g. watch tower and other concrete) built without consulting local people or civil society – led to conflict and criticism. Most recent Forest Department management plan proposes demolishing it!
- Tourism dilemma – over 200 boat loads of visitors per day at peak times, irresponsible ghat lessees – ecological damage v incentive for local people to protect forest.
- Conflict between villages over controlling visitor access.
- Co-management is recently introduced – in principle a forum for resolving conflicts and for limiting and allocating use rights.

Comparison of cases

Issue	Sunamganj - Fenarbak	Sunamganj - Rahimapur	Hakaluki	Ratargul
Tenure	Private/family - esmali	Khas land forest use rights leased out by DC for fixed period	Khas land, no formal arrangement made by DoE	Govt. land under Forest Department indefinitely
Institutional arrangement	Committee representing 5 families limits harvesting	NGO leased, formed CBO and planted trees,	CBOs (VCGs) protect and restore areas. No use permitted	FD protects, no extraction permitted, but fishing leased. New co-management
Threats and conflicts	Loss of traditional leaders, open to individual influence	Encroachment for houses and crops, 10 year lease, then trees might be felled	Felling, grazing and encroachment. CBOs lack any formal rights and land theoretically allocated to agriculture	Encroachment for aquaculture; plantations; inappropriate infrastructure; disputes over tourism incomes

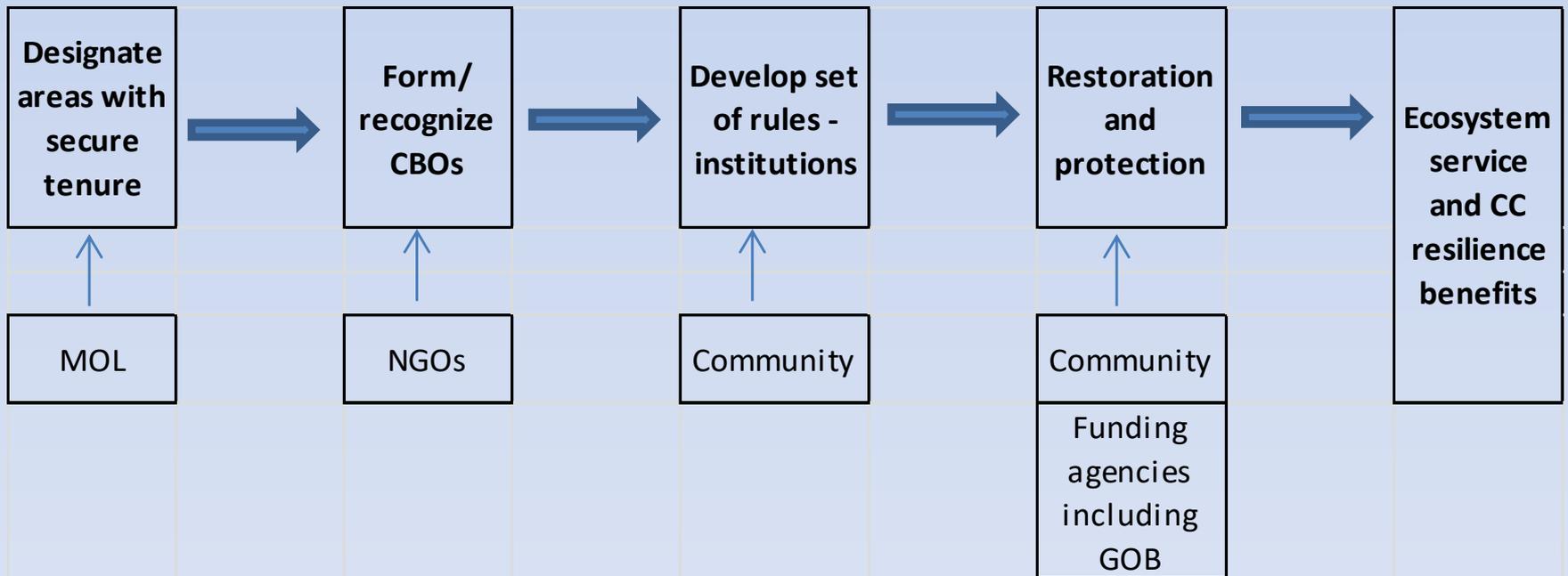
The problem

- In the three areas, and more generally, projects have focused on ecological restoration.
- Institutions have been neglected resulting in conflicts and fragile cooperation between communities, NGOs and government.
- What will stop trees being felled when they are valuable?
- Unclear tenure and rights make the sustainability of mitigation and adaptation benefits of recovering swamp forest uncertain.

Solution

- Communities playing a leading role in swamp forest restoration and management is needed but not sufficient.
- Planting trees and allowing reed swamp thickets to regenerate are not sufficient.
- Long-term tenure rights and responsibilities also need to be formally recognised by government.

How the solution would address the problem?



Relationships between Implementing Agencies and Beneficiaries

Challenge of multiple agencies

Ministry of Land

- Public lands are traditionally seen just as a source of revenue encouraging loss of swamp forest.
- Needs to change its management objectives in the interests of resilience, adaptation, mitigation, and local ecosystem services.
- Recognise swamp forest conservation lands as a category outside of revenue leasing.
- Promote expansion (restoration) to more public lands in haors.
- Adopt co-management with long term agreements with CBOs with aim of restoration, protection, and sustainable use.

Department of Environment should promote this approach in ECAs where it can oversee VCGs (CBOs).

Encourage **NGOs and local administration** to advise and oversee, but with responsibility on **CBOs and traditional institutions**.

Where natural resource use rights are clear there is scope for just resolution of competing claims.



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