

Evaluation Report

Name of the project
Conservation and Restoration of Biodiversity in
Singra National Park, Dinajpur

Implementing entity
RDRS Bangladesh



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Executive summary:

Singra sal forest had been promulgated as national park in 2010. During last two and half years RDRS Bangladesh has been implementing a project for conserving and restoring the biodiversity of the Singra National Park (SNP) with a donation from Arannayk Foundation. For the conservation and restoration of biodiversity of the SNP a collaborative management approach have been promoted. Information on socio-economic conditions of the people living in and around the forest had been collected through participatory baseline survey. Based on the result of that survey nine Forest User Groups (FUGs) along with Co-management Committee (CMC), Co-management Council and Peoples Forum (PF) had been formulated. This evaluation was carried out to reveal the relevance, adequacy and sustainability of the outcomes in relation to the objectives of the project. Objectives of the project are following:

- Restoration and conservation of the remaining Sal forests and the bio-diversity resources (flora, fauna) there of
- Establishment of a public-private partnership for the sustainable management system for the Sal forests
- Improvement of livelihood of the poor people living in and around the forests and their access to fuel wood through alternative means
- Creation of opportunities for revenue from the aesthetic values or environmental services of the forest, such as through eco-tourism development

This evaluation report was prepared based on information gathered from project documents, project reports and visits to project sites. All types of relevant stakeholders (project staff, participants, community leaders, beneficiary group members etc.) were interviewed to know their perceptions on project activities and the future of the current project as well. The evaluator also visited, verified and assessed the physical achievements of the project mentioned in the progress reports and final reports.

Since June, 2009 many activities such as awareness raising campaigns, training, distribution of different supports like latrine, vegetable seeds, fruit seedlings and improved stoves etc were undertaken to bring a change in the life and attitude of the local community. Peoples mobilization was also carried out by forming different local institutions like Forest User Groups (FUGs), Peoples Forum (PF), Co-management Committee (CMC) and Co-management Council. Besides, three exposer visits were arranged to build the capacity of the members of the Co-management Organizations (CMOs). Moreover, this new approach established a platform for local community to raise their voice. Even they got an opportunity to communicate with the Forest Department (FD) officials which was unbelievable before the inception of the project.

It is important to mention that ten lakh taka was given to the nine FUGs as Revolving Loan Fund (RLF). The FUG members got interest free loan from their respective group. They were able to think about the alternative income generation activities. This RLF money had helped them earning one to two thousand taka per month. This interest free loan system had a good impact in their livelihood.

The local community living in and around the Singra National Park (SNP) is traditionally dependent on the forest resources for their livelihood since time immemorial. So, it is very difficult to bring a sudden change in their mode of livelihood in a short period of time. Though tree felling and invasion of the outsiders had been reduced substantially, the dependency on fuel wood remained to some extent. Forest user groups could be strengthened with more skilled people. The amount for RLF is perceived to be meager. In order to have sustainable livelihood people need more opportunities and more income. A comprehensive and holistic approach is required for a sustainable development. More awareness raising programs, training programs should be arranged. Members of the CMOs should be provided with training to make them capable to arrange their regular meeting by themselves. Proper supervision and regular monitoring is required in RLF handling. More people can be brought under the umbrella of co-management by creating new FUGs.

Introduction:

Bangladesh houses tropical evergreen, semi-evergreen, deciduous, and mangrove forests. The estimated forest area of the country is about 2.53 million ha (0.02 ha person⁻¹) and this is about 17.5% of the total land base of Bangladesh (Choudhury, 2005). However, the Forest Resources Assessment 2000 indicates only 10.2% of the land area of Bangladesh is forest (Muhammed, 2005). The estimated rate of deforestation in natural forests during 1981-85 was 8000 ha annually, which increased during 1990-1995, to an annual rate of 8800 ha.

Following the Wildlife (Preservation) Order 1973, forest department started establishing Protected Areas. The Order allowed for the designation of three categories of protected areas: National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and Game Reserves. There were only six PAs until 1992. According to the recent forest policy 10% of the natural forests of Bangladesh should be brought under PA. In addition Ministry of Environment and Forest has also prepared the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), which is a national document that responds to the obligations of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Now there are 28 PAs in Bangladesh and one more has been proposed. Among them 15 are national parks and 13 are wildlife sanctuaries. Covering 1.78% of the country's total area, the PAs of Bangladesh cover 10.39% of the total forest area, on an average, 5% of the hill forests, 11% of the sal forests and 23% of the mangrove forests being protected (<http://bforest.gov.bd/dev/>). The effectiveness of PAs has long been discussed in terms of their ability to reduce deforestation and to conserve biodiversity. It has been suggested that carefully managed PAs could help to alleviate poverty through conserving biological resources whilst providing developmental benefits to marginalizes communities (WWF, 2008).

Over the five years (2004-2009), Nishorgo Support Project (NSP) had supported the co-management of tropical forest resources in five pilot sites of the FD protected area network. The Nishorgo Program of FD aimed to protect and conserve the forests and

biodiversity of the country's PAs by building partnerships between the Forest Department (FD) and main stakeholders based on mutual trust and shared roles and responsibilities for biodiversity conservation. From the NSP efforts to date, a number of important lessons have emerged that would be relevant for future PA co-management efforts that the FD may want to undertake. The FD is interested in expanding the PA system and in applying a participatory approach to all the PAs. One site considered by the department for an expansion of the PA system is located within parts of the Thakurgaon Range under Dinajpur Forest Division. In 2010, the FD developed an internal proposal to declare the Part of Singra Sal (305.69ha out of 343 ha) Forest as a new National Park covering an estimated 305.69 hectares.

The deforestation study using aerial remote sensing data found that approximately 61342.0 ha of forest area has been denuded during the past 25 years in Dinajpur Forest Division. The annual deforestation rate is roughly 2454.0 ha in which human interference is the main cause of deforestation. To reverse this adverse situation Arannayk Foundation along with FD have come forward to halt the deforestation at Singra National Part (SNP) and to support a project on restoration and conservation of the natural tropical forest blocks in Singra Sal forest, Thakurgaon Range.

This evaluation was carried out to find out the relevance, adequacy and sustainability of the outcomes of the project in relation to its objectives. Different techniques were employed in the field to collect information from different types of stakeholders. Approaches used for information gathering was associated with the different informants' groups as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Informant groups and data collection tools employed

	In depth interview	Focus-group discussion	Participant observation
Community (Project Participants)	—	√	√
Community (Project Non-Participants)	√	—	√
FD and NGO officials	√	—	—
CMC* and PF* members	—	√	—

* CMC= Co-management Committee, *PF= Peoples Forum

Besides, project documents such as Project Proposal, Draft Project Report were reviewed and physical achievements were verified and assessed to fulfill the purpose of the evaluation.

Context and objectives of the project:

The northwest region of Bangladesh is almost devoid of natural forest except some small patches of Sal forests existing in a few areas. Once the Sal forests were rich in biodiversity in the past but many associated species of Sal (including Amloki, Bohera, Haritaki) are no more found in these forests. Due to the loss of food source and habitat, these forests have become devoid of wildlife. Aside from general population depending on these forests for fuel wood and other forest products, a number of indigenous communities live in and around these forests and they depend on the forest

for food and other necessities of life. The collection of Sal leaves from the forest floor is a major problem. Everyday 250 – 300 sacs of Sal leaves are collected by women and children from the forest floor. Secondly, there are numerous roads/trails through the forests. Arannayk Foundation has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with FD for collaborating for the conservation and restoration of biodiversity assets of the tropical forests in Bangladesh. The MoU provides for establishing co-management system, involving FD, forest users' groups and local leaders, for sustainable management of the remaining Sal forests of the Singra National Park.

The implementing entity for the NGO component of the project, RDRS, has identified 1815 forest dependent households in six villages (Chaulia, Dalagram, Nandagaon, Nortodangi, Singra and Prannagar) surrounding the targeted forest and has organized them into nine groups (FUG). The FUGs sit in regular monthly meetings and have started collecting monthly savings from the participants to develop a revolving fund to invest in small scale businesses. RDRS has completed a baseline survey of the biodiversity resources of the project area (forest, homesteads) and socio-economic conditions of the forest dependent communities.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the project are:

- Restoration and conservation of the remaining Sal forests and the bio-diversity resources (flora, fauna) thereof.
- Establishment of a public-private partnership for the sustainable management system for the Sal forests.
- Improvement of livelihood of the poor people living in and around the forests and their access to fuel wood through alternative means.
- Creation of opportunities for revenue from the aesthetic values or environmental services of the forest, such as through eco-tourism development.

Project activities and outcomes:

This section presents the major findings of the evaluation in the ground.

Objective 1: Restoration and conservation of the remaining Sal forests and the bio-diversity resources (flora, fauna) thereof

With help of an expert a survey on Sal forest had been carried out to learn the present biodiversity of the forest. The project staffs conducted awareness raising programs to restore and conserve the remaining Sal forest. Besides, they provided improved stoves to reduce the dependency on forest resources and exploitation of forest resources. Regular awareness raising campaigns such as billboard establishment, observance of different days (World Forestry Day, World Environment Days), forest campaign/rally in and around the forest, message throw by T-shirt, art/essay/debate competition, seedling distribution among the students, folk song/ gambhira, micking for

conservation and restoration of biodiversity etc have helped the community to learn about the importance of the forest for their livelihood and environment.

RDRS arranged intense awareness raising campaigns during peak seasons of forest exploitation. The participatory awareness raising programs established a sense of ownership of the forest among the community. Illicit felling by the outsiders, that was frequent in past, has been reduced significantly. But the dependency of the people on forest resources for fuel-wood and household requirement has been observed. People were found collecting Sal leaves from forest floor. Attitude of the Forest Department officials has been changed. They are working with community people towards biodiversity conservation. Improve stove users showed some dissatisfaction that the stove took a long time to cook. So, they are using the stoves irregularly.

Objective 2: Establishment of a public-private partnership for the sustainable management system for the Sal forests

A baseline survey was carried out to learn the community and their mode of dependency on the forest. Based on the survey results, nine Forest Resource User groups (FUGs) had been formed. Afterwards a Peoples Forum, a Co-management Council and Co-management Committee had also been formed. The latter three local institutions represented diversified stakeholders like elite people of the community, representatives from local administration, Forest Department Officials etc.

The FUGs arranged regular monthly meetings. In the meeting the members deposit their monthly savings. They also have discussed about their problems. The NGO officials also made them aware of the importance of the forest. FUGs were provided with a tin shed room for their monthly meeting. This established a sense of ownership among the people. People were also found serious about their responsibilities.

The Peoples forum (PF) seated in regular meeting. They used to consult about the conditions of the FUGs, forest and community. Beat officer of the FD attended in the PF meeting regularly. The PF seemed to be very powerful and effective. The Union Parishad chairman, who is the chair of PF, has good leadership. But co-management council and co-management committee had just been formed. No activity of CMC has been observed yet except three exposure visits. The executive body of the co-management, the co-management committee, reported to be not active in Singra National Park.

Objective 3: Improvement of livelihood of the poor people living in and around the forests and their access to fuel wood through alternative means

To date nine FUGs have been formed in SNP. These nine FUGs were provided with Tk. 10 lakhs as interest free RLF. Each member had access to the RLF. People were using this money for their income generating activities. Project participants were

given trainings on different professions for the efficient use of the RLF money. To fulfill their nutritional demand these people were also given 1250 fruit seedlings.

More people were interested to get involved with FUGs by observing the output of the project. Group members sit in monthly meetings regularly. They have fixed dates for sitting in the meeting for each group. They collect their monthly savings and maintain a resolution book. After receiving the basic accounts training two groups are depositing their money into banks directly without help of RDRS personnel.

One hundred improved stoves were distributed among the project participants for efficient use of fuel wood. As improved stoves consume low fuel and emit less CO₂, it is an effective adaptation towards climate change. But some people are still using traditional stoves as improved stoves take long time for cooking.

Objective 4: Creation of opportunities for revenue from the aesthetic values or environmental services of the forest, such as through eco-tourism development

No initiative has been undertaken yet under this objective.

The following table 2 describes briefly about the activities undertaken to fulfill the project objectives and the outcomes of the activities.

Table 2: Summary of the activities and outcomes of the project

<i>Restoration and conservation of the remaining Sal forests and the bio-diversity resources (flora, fauna) thereof</i>	
Activities	Outcome
Conduct baseline survey on socio-economic and biodiversity	Dependency on the forest resources has been substantially reduced through different awareness raising campaigns
Mobilize forest resource users towards forest conservation	170 stoves have been distributed to reduce carbon emission and to reduce the fuel consumption
Building awareness through billboard establishment, observance of different days (World Forestry Day, World Environment Days), forest campaign/rally in and around the forest, message throw by T-shirt, art/essay/debate competition, seedling distribution among the students, folk song/ gambhira, micking for conservation and restoration of biodiversity	60% of the FUG members have changed their occupation depending on forest
Resource collection survey	Intense awareness raising programs have been arranged during peak season for forest resource collection
	Forest destruction by the outsiders has been reduced
<i>Establishment of a public-private partnership for the sustainable management system for the Sal forests</i>	
Activities	Outcome
Establish local institutions like PF, CMC, FUGs.	PF, Co-management Committee and Council have been formed.
Develop institutional capacity of FUGs and CMC members.	Exposure visits had been arranged.
Facilitate regular monthly meeting of the FUGs and PF.	Eight FUGs have been provided with meeting rooms.
Identification of forest resource users.	Regular communication has been established among key stakeholders for better functioning of the FUGs.
<i>Improvement of livelihood of the poor people living in and around the forests and their access to fuel wood through alternative means</i>	
Activities	Outcome
Improve quality of life	Tailoring and vegetable cultivation training were provided to fulfill the nutrition demand of the beneficiaries.
Establish interest free revolving loan fund	9 FUGs have been provided with 10 lacs taka as interest free revolving fund
Identify, promote and support different income generation activities through participation of the beneficiaries	1250 fruit seedlings have been distributed to fulfill the nutrition demand of the beneficiaries.

Creation of opportunities for revenue from the aesthetic values or environmental services of the forest, such as through eco-tourism development

No initiatives has been undertaken.

Impacts:

Accountability among stakeholders has been established which has helped reducing the forest resource exploitation. Common people have a feeling of ownership. Most importantly, a frequent communication has been established between FD and local community. Besides, people often inform Project officials about illicit felling incidents and they even do not hesitate to make FD officials accountable for their misdeeds. Forest destruction by the outsiders has been reduced. Even local community has stopped tree felling. But their dependency on the fuel wood has not been reduced significantly. Though they are aware about the importance of the forest but they do not have much option for fuel.

For capacity building of the stakeholders RDRS has carried out many activities like exposure visit, training of the cashiers of the FUGs, tailoring and vegetable cultivation to the marginal women. Some of the cashiers were able to manage their own bank account but some of them are still dependent on the NGO officials.

Indigenous people were provided with sanitary latrine. They used to use open latrine before the inception of the project. This initiative improved their quality of life. Furthermore, poor women were provided training for vegetable cultivation and tailoring. They were also given money for buying swing machine and vegetable seed. These women earn 30-70 taka per day from tailoring. This had a significant impact in their life. The other IGAs like pig rearing were also profitable.

A new paradigm for forest management (co-management) has been introduced to the community people. But it is in its juvenile stage. Intensive care is necessary for its maturation. Institutions like PF and FUGs needs facilitator for conducting meetings. But the new local institutions provided people a feeling of power and ownership of the forest. Institutions under the project created a platform for raising common people's voice and discuss their needs with the elite stakeholders like FD officials, NGO officials, local leaders and local administration.

Sustainability Potentials:

This project has just initiated co-management management approach to the community people and the FD officials at Singra National Park. To date nine FUGs have been formed. The NGO officials facilitate them in arranging their monthly meeting. The Co-management Organizations (CMOs) such as Council and Committee have just been formed. For active roles of these two organizations funds should be made available. If these committee members are provided with technical and economic support for long term basis then there is a potentiality for the sustainability of co-management approach at Singra National Park. People are more aware about the importance of the forest than before. But traditionally they were dependent on the forest for their fuel (sal leaf and wood). More motivation program with alternative energy option may reduce their dependency on the forest on a sustainable basis.

Most of the FUG members urged for more money as revolving fund. They perceived that the present amount of money was unable to bring any substantial change in their livelihood.

These people are just being introduced with a new paradigm. If they are in touch with this new approach and get involved in this process and new supports are provided in a long term basis then there is a good potential of sustainability of the impacts that has already been observed in last two and a half years.

Weakness/ Areas that need to be strengthened:

The following areas should be strengthened in order to improve the project performances.

- Some irregularities has been reported in case of monthly savings deposition.
- Some Chairman, Secretary and Cashier of FUGs were found illiterate and sometimes unable to manage FUG meeting.
- Amount and number of RLF is insufficient compared to the size of the community living in and around the SNP.
- Forest officials should be more intimately involved in the project activities and they should be made more accountable.
- FUG meetings are mostly discussed about monthly savings. Discussion on motivational campaigns and biodiversity conservation is less.

Recommendations:

Overall the project has been successfully implemented but there are scopes of improvements. In order to have sustainable impacts of the project following activities are recommended.

- Project duration should be extended for another two to three years for a significant change in the dependency on the forest and behavior of the people towards forest resources.
- Educated and skilled people are required as FUG Chairman, cashier and Secretary and they should be well trained otherwise the FUGs will be inactive after the termination of the project.
- A holistic approach is essential for finding more alternative livelihood options selection. The member should be provided with better option and training on that option prior to receive any financial support.
- More people should be brought under the umbrella of co-management. The size of the FUGs (25-26 members) is good. But more groups should be formulated to bring more people for a true change.

- CMC should be provided required fund according to the proposal. They should be activated to execute the daily activities related to SNP management.
- Ecotourism should be developed with the active involvement of the local community to facilitate revenue generation from the forest.

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