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**Community Empowerment by NGOs  
- Experience from the Fourth Fisheries Project  
in Bangladesh**

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*It is clear that local elites are quite capable of capturing the process and benefits of whatever technological or policy changes that come along. Yet, the literature on local management generally has ignored the issue of power. This is potentially a serious oversight. If authority over a resource system is transferred to the community level, local elites are positioned to turn this to their advantage, and in the process simply strengthen. The end result, in all likelihood, would not be the sort of equitable development considered an almost natural consequence of community-based management*

Davis and Bailey (1996, pp. 262-3)

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Community-based development requires empowering of the community. Empowerment is a condition and goal of co-management (Jentoft 2005). Although, the concept of community is generally believed to be complex and open to different interpretations (Agarwal and Gibson 1998, Davis and Bailey 1996), in a more heuristic sense it involves at least two types of actors: the poor and the non-poor<sup>1</sup>. The non-poor, or a section of them, are generally powerful social actors and referred to as “rural elites”. They frequently capture or dominate community institutions that can play an instrumental role in shaping the livelihoods of the poor (Platteau 2004). This dominance helps them capture resources poured in by the state and the donors to improve the welfare of the poor. This phenomenon is generally referred to as “elite capture” (Platteau and Gaspart 2003). So the essential problem for rural poverty reduction in particular and development in general is empowering the poor so that they can shape or re-construct community institutions in a way that can protect their rights to their entitlements. These entitlements can range from use of various services provided by the state or donors to access to CPRs such as fisheries. Phrases such as “poor as manager of fisheries resources” or “local management and user-group involvement” appear frequently in the literature (Ahmed et al. (1997)).

In the context of Bangladesh fisheries most fishing grounds are legally or illegally captured by the rural elites and they are appropriating the major share of the benefits from their *de facto* rights over them (Toufique 1997, Ullah 1985). These fishing grounds have also been degraded for many reasons such as pollution, siltation of the river bed etc. (Asaduzzaman and Toufique 1997, Toufique 2001). As a result the benefits of donor and state investments in increasing the productivity of these fishing grounds for poverty reduction are reaped mainly by the elites. These investments are both compensatory (for example stocking in Oxbow Lake Projects, Second Aquaculture Development Project, the Third Fisheries Project etc.) as well as mitigatory (for example, restoration of fish habitat as in FAP 6 and 17, see Ahmed et al. 1998). This is the quintessential distributional outcome of state-donor intervention in the inland fisheries in Bangladesh. As attempts are made to enhance the productivity of the fishing grounds, the benefits are reaped by the non-fisher rural elites. The need to shield the fishers from the clutches of the non-elites has therefore shaped the design of development interventions. It

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<sup>1</sup> Formal models of participation generally address the problem in this way (Bardhan 2000).

started with transferring fishing rights to fisher's co-operatives in 1960s and gradually moved towards involvement of the NGOs for empowering the fishing community from the second half of the 1980s.

The Fourth Fisheries Project (hereafter, FFP), started in 2000, involved the NGOs extensively for empowering the fishing community so that the benefits of mitigatory and compensatory interventions undertaken by the project could be retained by the community of project beneficiaries, i.e., the fishers. The project involved 14 NGOs in 49 sites for empowering community institutions (Begum 2001).<sup>2</sup> In essence, they were posted to ward off the capture attempts made by the rural elites by empowering the fishers. This paper aims at describing the process of elite capture and experience of the NGOs in their assigned endeavour to empower the fishers. It also highlights the key lessons learned from this experience. Based on a study of 12 FFP sites undertaken by the author over the period from May 2003 to June 2004, this paper concludes that the NGOs have generally failed to empower the fishers and as a result the major benefits of the project were reaped by the rural elites. It was not possible for the NGOs to challenge the rural power structure and as a result they mainly remained as silent observers of the take-over of project developed community institutions by the rural elites and in some cases they explicitly or implicitly collided with them. Only in two cases the NGOs were apparently able to make some breakthrough at the time the impact study was undertaken. There are four distinguishing features of these sites, a relatively more **enabling state machinery**, a relatively **weak local power structure**, a relatively more **preexistent and organised fishers** and a relatively **broad-based participation** of fishers' institutions. Thus the NGOs in these sites had the groundwork mainly done by history, i.e. well-performing local institutions were already in place in these sites. The NGOs had to build on this rather than start from scratch as was generally the case with the other sites. Rather than developing new institutions, the implementing NGOs in these sites tried to improvise existing institutions of the fishers often at the cost of not strictly adhering to FFP guidelines. This shows again that community empowerment takes time to crystallise to become effective and broad based and a strong state is essential to withstand capture attempts. NGOs alone may find it difficult to empower the fishers. The state and the donors have to be patient in community development projects. Expectation of a quick result may turn out to be counterproductive (Platteau 2002, 2003b). Therefore, in developing countries characterised by weak governance and state and a pressing need for rapid reduction of poverty, such strategy of community based fisheries management should be seriously reconsidered.

Section 2 describes the basic feature of the resource system and the importance of the fisheries sector in rural livelihoods in Bangladesh. Section 3 shows how the NGOs got slowly involved in the fisheries sector of Bangladesh. The methodology used in this study is briefly described in Section 4. The FFP constructed various community institutions. These are described in Section 5. The case studies produced by the study are presented in Section 6. The conclusions and lessons learned are summarised in Section 7.

## 2. THE RESOURCE SYSTEM AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Minkin and Boyce (1994, p. 36) reminds us of the French traveller Francois Bernier, who visited Bengal around 1660, reported that it "produces rice in such abundance that it supplies not only the neighbouring but remote states ... Fish of every species, whether fresh or salt, is of the

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<sup>2</sup> The actual number of NGOs involved and the number of sites may vary depending on the implementation stage of the project. Some water bodies are dropped for poor performance during the implementing period of the project.

same profusion. In a word, Bengal abounds with every necessary of life." This is part of history now.

Fish in Bangladesh comes from two sources, inland (mainly fresh water) and marine (Table 1). The inland fisheries sector is classified into two broad categories, capture (also called 'open') and culture (also called 'closed'). While the term inland is used to separate this sector from the marine<sup>3</sup>, the term capture (open) fishery is used to refer to the harvesting of "fish and prawn populations in the open inland water systems (that are) self-reproducing and self-sustaining" under ideal conditions (Ali 1989, p. 38). On the other hand "growing of fish in confined bodies of water like the ponds and oxbow lakes through aquaculture operations is termed culture fishery which is comparable to the cultivation of land based crops like rice or wheat" (Ali 1989, p. 38).

**Table 1 Annual production in Bangladesh fisheries (1997-98)**

<b>Fishery Type</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>Catch (tons)</b>	<b>Yield (Kg/ha)</b>	<b>% of Total Catch</b>	<b>% of Inland Area</b>
Rivers & Estuaries	1031563	152579	133		
Beels	114161	74328	651		
Kaptai	68800	7238	105		
Floodlands	2832792	497922	176		
<b>Capture Total</b>	<b>4047316</b>	<b>732067</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>89%</b>
Baors	5488	4282	329		
Pond and Ditch	305025	795810	1376		
Coastal Shrimp Farm	203071	114660	312		
<b>Culture Total</b>	<b>513584</b>	<b>914752</b>	<b>912</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Inland Total</b>	<b>4560900</b>	<b>1646819</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>78%</b>	
Marine(industrial)	-	32606			
Marine(artisanal)	-	422601			
<b>Marine Total</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>455207</b>		<b>22%</b>	
<b>Total</b>		<b>2102026</b>			

Note: Rivers & estuaries include Sunderbans and beels include haors.

Source: DOF/BFRSS (2004)

The different aquatic components of the open water fisheries are rivers and estuaries, *beels*<sup>4</sup>, Kaptai Lake<sup>5</sup> and the flood lands. The components of the culture fisheries are *baors*<sup>6</sup>, ponds, and the shrimp farms.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The marine sector is characterized by open access within Bangladesh' Exclusive Economic Zone.

<sup>4</sup> A *beel* is a small lake or a deeper portion in a low-lying natural depression area that may or may not dry up in the dry season.

<sup>5</sup> The Kaptai Lake was formed by the creation of a dam across the River Karnaphuli in the district of Chittagong.

<sup>6</sup> Oxbow lake or dead river; a closed body of water, isolated from the river by a change in its course. "Segments of river cut off from the mainstream flowing river".

The capture fisheries sector covered 93 per cent of the total area under the inland fisheries in 1997-98. This implies that this particular resource system is relatively more physically accessible to a large number of people, particularly to those who live in the rural areas. This relative accessibility makes it more complex to manage as exclusion becomes difficult. About a four-fifth of total catch originated from the inland source in 1997-98. This makes this sector particularly important for livelihoods of the rural population. It is largest in area, accounts for the bulk of the catch and therefore even a small increase in its productivity can be expected to result in a higher catch.

This sector is endowed with more than 260 species of fish (Rahman 1989) and about 56 species of prawn (Kibria 1983). Estimates range to over 500 species when the close offshore river dependent fishes of the Bay of Bengal are considered (Minkin et. al. 1997). It ranks fourth in the world, after China, India and the former Soviet Union (Agüero 1989). There is a strong consumer preference for freshwater fish. According to World Bank (1991), 75% of the total fish consumed in a year comes from freshwater sources and the rural people consume more freshwater fish (76%) compared to their urban counterparts (68%). The relative contribution of fish to calorie and protein intake from animal sources is also higher in the rural sector. The contribution of fish to per capita protein and calorie intake from animal sources for the rural population has been estimated to be 74% and 72% respectively and for the urban population 67% and 70% respectively (GOB, 1995).

The share of capture fisheries in total catch has declined from 63 per cent to 35 per cent between 1984 and 2004 and during this period it grew at a rate of 2% per annum. On the other hand, the share of culture fisheries in total catch increased from 16% to 44% during this period and it grew at a rate of 11% per annum (DOF/BFRSS 2004). Resource degradation has occurred in the open waters in a context when too many people depend on it for sustenance and it is relatively more accessible. In many fishing environment often a pair of hands can catch fish from the muddy paddy fields or a drying canal. This sector is now in crisis. Its dominance in terms of catch has declined and the culture sector is now the prime source of fish in Bangladesh. An increasing amount of fish now comes in from the neighbouring countries but no figure is available.

The FFP intervened in the capture fisheries sector in a big way in its Open Water Fisheries Component (hereafter OWFC). The intervention was mainly confined to rivers and *beels*. It is only in this sector the FFP wanted to establish the rights of the fishers over the fishing grounds so that they could reap the benefits of compensatory and mitigatory investments. In this paper we are only concerned with the OWFC component of the FFP and we will use these acronyms interchangeably.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.1 THE NATURE OF PROPERTY RIGHTS OVER THE RESOURCE SYSTEM

By Regulation XXVII of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 in Bengal, the rights over fisheries were included as a part of the rights over estates held by the *zamindars* or the landlords. The *zamindars* leased out these rights over fisheries to farmers, moneylenders and occasionally to the fishers (Pokrant, Reeves and McGuire 1997). The fishers had to pay tolls to the *ijaradars* or

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<sup>7</sup> Note that there are other types of fisheries such as rice fields, borrow-pits and roadside canals but we do not have much information about them. Catches from these fisheries are generally not recorded in fisheries statistics although it has significant nutritional and distributional value.

<sup>8</sup> The FFP has four component besides OWFC; Shrimp production, Aquaculture Extension, Biodiversity Conservation and Institutional Development.

the leaseholders for access rights to the fisheries. Thus most of the colonial period in Bengal was characterised by *de jure* as well as *de facto* private property rights (including those of the fishers, albeit in limited cases) over the inland fisheries resource system. This does not rule out the presence of open access and community rights but there is not enough evidence to make any conclusive statement to their extent. Possibly in high rivers open access conditions prevailed but not enough is known about that.

A significant part of the inland fisheries is now divided into about 13, 000 water bodies called *jalkars* or *jalmahals* (World Bank 1991).<sup>9</sup> Following the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1950, a large number of these water bodies are now *de jure* owned by the state but property rights over them are temporarily<sup>10</sup> transferred to the fishers mainly through a leasing process. This is generally referred to as the leasing system. The leasing process gives priority to the fishers' co-operative for acquiring leasing rights. When the fishers' co-operatives do not bid for a water body, participation in the auction is made open. However, it has been observed that the fishers in general have failed to establish effective property rights over the water bodies. Property rights over the water bodies are eventually transferred to a class of people coming from outside the fishing community. This class of people is usually referred to as the lessees. Rahman (1987) calls them "white collared middlemen", or "water lords". A field worker identified them as "local propertied class" (Anonymous 1991), Ullah (1985) and Chowdhury (1987) identified them as fish-merchants and moneylenders. The main strategy taken by these rural elites is capture of the fishers' co-operatives or disabling them. Following their colonial counterparts, the lessees charge tolls on fishers for rights to access to the water bodies under their control. However, the fishers are sometimes able to hold rights over some water bodies. Property rights in these water bodies are generally held by a class of wealthy fishers who own a substantial amount of fishing assets. Some of them were fishers but had given up fishing for long time. They are primarily involved in participating in the process of acquiring rights over fishing grounds. Like the lessees they also charge tolls on fishers and Toufique (1997) refers to them as "fishermen lessees". As we will see, some water bodies were under the control of these fishers lessees in the FFP.

The leasing system has been considered as exploitative (the fishers are "rack-rented") and not conducive to resource sustainability (Ahmed et al 1997, Capistrano 1997). In lieu of it a licensing system was proposed and partially implemented. While the leasing system transferred (*de jure*) property rights over water bodies to registered fishers' cooperatives through auctions, the licensing system made an attempt to transfer property rights over water bodies to individual fishers in the form of non-transferable, renewable licenses. The licensing system, which may be viewed as a first attempt of co-management appearing in the name of NFMP or the New Fisheries Management Policy<sup>11</sup> could not change the property rights structure over fishing grounds much. Many fake fishers received licenses; the *ijaradars* were controlling the water bodies from the background, the state failed to provide the fishers with technical support and credit. This possibly prompted the government to do away with licensing system altogether in all type of water bodies.

The government changed its position regarding fishing rights transfer several times. For example, in 1995 it declared the flowing rivers and canals as open access. This is generally

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<sup>9</sup> The exact number is not known since many water bodies have permanently dried up while some new ones have emerged.

<sup>10</sup> The period of tenure generally varies from one (for open waters generally) to three years (for closed waters generally).

<sup>11</sup> Capistrano et al. (1997, p. 151) considered the NFMP as Bangladesh's "aquatic equivalent of land reform".

known as the Open Access Policy. This policy has been criticised on various grounds and from various quarters (See Toufique 1996, Capistrano et al. 1997).<sup>12</sup> The licensing system was abolished. The government also shifted closed water body below 20 acres in size to the Ministry of Youth. Some fishing grounds are under the Water Development Board. Seasonal water bodies are also formed on private lands during the monsoon, particularly in the low lying areas. This complex nature of property rights over inland fisheries and the involvement of the various organs of the state<sup>13</sup> should not confuse the reader for understanding the issue addressed in this paper. The Ministry of Land (hereafter MOL), however, is the custodian of the major fishing grounds. The water bodies under the FFP were transferred from this Ministry to the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock (hereafter, MOFL) for implementing the FFP. This transfer process is not also easy and many FFP site could not start on time or start at all because of the delay in the transfer process. The Department of Fisheries (hereafter, DOF) under the MOFL is implementing the FFP in the water bodies effectively transferred to the DOF.

### 3. NGO INVOLVEMENT IN THE OPEN WATER FISHERIES SECTOR

There is no comprehensive study on the activities of the NGOs in the fisheries sector in Bangladesh. FAP 17 (1994a) attempted to fill the gap by conducting a baseline study of the activities of 21 NGOs who were involved in the fisheries sector at that time. The study found the NGOs were not much involved in the fisheries sector, particularly in the open waters.<sup>14</sup> The study identified two factors for this relative lack of response: low priority given to the fisheries sector and at the same time aquaculture was becoming more technically demanding. But soon some NGOs gradually acquired skill for their involvement in aquaculture based fisheries. On the other side, funding for fisheries development projects from 1991 to 1995 was estimated at US\$332 million, \$240 million of which was from external sources (MOFL-FAO 1992). "Bangladesh's NGO, noted for their dynamism and innovation as well as their size and scale of operations, have been quick to take advantage of opportunities in the fishery sector created by technology development and availability of donor funding" (Capistrano 1997, p. 149).

The NGOs developed models of aquaculture development and extension which would enable the poor and the landless to participate at a larger scale. They generally worked with small groups of homogeneous members. Examples of such intervention are Grameen Bank in closed water aquaculture (Ahmed et al. 1997, Capistrano 1997) and BRAC in the Oxbow Lake Project II (Middendorp et al. 1996, Apu and Middendorp 1998). However, majority of the NGOs in the sample faced problems in organizing their target groups. These problems include intervention by local elites, overstocking of the ponds, economic stress, complications in making leasing arrangements with the government or private persons, group homogeneity and of supervision.

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<sup>12</sup> The State Minister for Fisheries and Livestock Mr Satish Chandra said at the inaugural session of a seminar on "Development and Management of Open Water Bodies" held on 10 September, 1996 that the abolition of the leasing system of open water bodies has now led to the situation of "might makes right" in different areas of the country (Daily Star, September 11, Wednesday: p. 2). A Bangla weekly (Dainik Bangla, 22 November 1995: p. 7) reports a case of failure in implementing this policy in the River Bolai in Jamalganj thana under the district of Sunamganj. Similar information is also contained in a report on water bodies of Sunamganj (Dainik Bangla, 29 July 1996:, p. 7).

<sup>13</sup> As many as 25 departments and 13 other ministries of the government are also responsible for various aspects of fisheries management and regulation in Bangladesh (Capistrano et. al 1997).

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that BRAC "commenced its activities by providing relief and rehabilitation assistance to the community of fishermen in the north-east, who were displaced due to the atrocities during 1971" (Zohir 2004, p. 4109).

In recent years the NGOs have somewhat enlarged their area of intervention in the fisheries sector. Most of the NGOs take fisheries projects as a component of their wider poverty alleviation programs. In fact, the declaration of the NFMP opened up spaces for donor and NGO intervention in the open water fisheries in Bangladesh. The NFMP also involved the NGOs but limited information available on this suggests that the experience with the NGOs was not very encouraging. Two NGOs failed to work in two water bodies either because of bureaucratic non-cooperation or due to the intervention of local power elites. The NGOs have been a natural partner of this process that followed. The second collaboration came during the implementation of the IMOF (Improved Management of Open Water Fisheries Project). IMOF (Improved Management of Open Water Fisheries Project) was undertaken by Ford Foundation, ICLARM and DOF in 1987 to test management approaches under the NFMP. It involved biological research, socio-economic monitoring and policy studies. The government sought to "work in partnership with NGOs and the fishing communities in order to: increase participation of local fishers in managing the fisheries; utilize NGO resources for input support to fishers in place of agents; and mobilize NGO experience in human development training and organization building to create alternative or supplementary income opportunities for fishers and thereby reduce pressure on the fisheries" (Ahmed et al. 1992, p. 33). It was implemented in two phases IMOF I and IMOF II. IMOF I was implemented in 9 sites during 1987-89 and IMOF II were implemented during 1992-1995 in 19 sites. As Capistrano et al. (1997, p. 152) mentions, "no conclusions can be drawn regarding performance in sites supposed to have been under NGO management because, unfortunately, NGO participation in this phase of the experiment was uneven". Capistrano (1997) does not explain on what plane it was uneven. However, some useful lessons have been learned from IMOF I. Supply of credit and other inputs increased returns to the fishers. But the DOF failed to supply both adequately. Conservation measures had also failed. As Capistrano et al. (1996) admits production relations and distribution of output in the sample fisheries proceeded as usual. The fishers also felt insecure about the continuity of their fishing rights through renewable licenses. Thus, in a sense IMOF I could not overcome the crucial problems already faced by the NFMP.

In IMOF II, the NGOs were responsible for, identifying genuine fishers for licensing by DOF, encouraging greater participation of fishers in management, utilising their own financial and organizational resources to provide fishers credit and input support, use their experience in social mobilization and human capacity building to create alternative or supplementary income opportunities for fishers in the project sites.

"The second phase turned out to be an ambitious experiment in government-NGO-fishers co-management, with few rivals in the world" (Berkes quoted in Capistrano et al. 1997). Project implementation was affected by several factors such as staff turnover in ICLARM and some NGOs, delays in fielding the required technical expertise, government red tape, and draught in 1994-5.

Experience with the NGOs, again, was not satisfactory. Licenses acted as a certain degree of control in only one site but in others not either because of the nature of the water bodies or the state of organisation of the fishers. "Preparation of the lists of "genuine" fishers took up a major portion of the NGOs' time." (Capistrano 1997). Major issues were exclusion of subsistence fishers and local power brokers (this invited "hostility, non-co-operation, and even sabotage" (Capistrano 1997, p. 156). Free-riding by non-licensee fishers could not be restrained. "Because they impose service charges and social development conditions (for example, participation in health and literacy programs), NGOs were regarded by some as being no different than traditional moneylenders." (Capistrano 1997, p. 156).



Thus it is clear that the NGO involvement in the open water fisheries in Bangladesh was associated with a context where the fishers were thought of in need of external support to come out of the clutches of the lessees and the middlemen. For example, Berkes (2000, p. 2) characterised this as "institutions oriented for development, empowerment and co-management". But this was not achieved to any satisfactory level. Those who were extremely enthusiastic about the success of NGO based property rights development acknowledged this, of course with disappointment. There were high hopes for this government, NGO, community based development. The NGOs were even expected to substitute for providing credit to the fishers so that the fishers did not have to borrow from those who allegedly exploited them. As Capistrano (1997, p. 152) notes, "without incorporating workable mechanisms to provide credit as well as services performed by moneylenders and middlemen, a shift from leasing to licensing alone would have limited benefits for the fishers". Similar role was demanded from the state. In view of the falling license revenue from the NFMP, it was suggested that the DOF play the role of the *ijaradar* (BCAS 1988c, pp. 6-7), "the collection of license fees has declined ... this declining trend may continue further in the flowing river fisheries, since these are effectively becoming open-access fisheries ... The production-management role of the *ijaradars* (lease holders) needs to be effectively substituted by DOF management if the NFMP is to be fully successful."

The foreign institutions heavily involved in the capture fisheries in Bangladesh such as the Ford Foundation and ICLARM (now the World Fish Center) to Bangladesh took a long time to understand that "it was a lobbying of politicians by a fishing association (*Jatiya Matsayajibi Samity*) that first led to the emergence of NFMP in 1986." (Ahmed et al. 1997, p. 246). Thus, historically speaking, NGO involvement in the management of open water fisheries in Bangladesh started with a false start. This particular association slowly disappeared not because the NGOs or those who supported them but its patrons lost their power base. The donors expected right service from the wrong agents and disenchantment soon followed. It was clear that the NGOs were driven more by financial incentives rather than by any genuine commitment to empower the fishers or to improve the well-being of the poor fishers.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on an independent impact assessment study of 12 FFP sites commissioned by the FFP conducted by the author from May 2003 to June 2004. These studies are essentially qualitative in nature using mainly PRA techniques (focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, oral histories key informant interviews, individual case studies etc.). The Technical Team comprising of international and local consultants of the FFP provided a list of water bodies that were to be studied and also decided on the sequence of the sites to be visited. During the course of the work, the study team had no clue on what criteria the water bodies were selected by the FFP. At the end of the project it was gathered that the water bodies were purposively selected by the FFP on the basis of their expectation of the project having detectable impact on project beneficiaries and the type of intervention (i.e., stocking, sanctuaries, habitat restoration etc.). Thus all but in two sites the project could start in the first year (2000-2001) and in the two sites (Ichamoti River and Jagannthpur Kole) the project started in the second year. Thus enough time was available for the project to expect intervention outcome in these sites. Table 1 provides the list of FFP sites studied by the author.

**Table 2 Studied FFP sites**

No.	Water body	District	Habitat	NGO	No. of villages	Inter-vention <sup>1</sup>
1	Haster <i>Beel</i>	Joypurhat	<i>Beel</i>	BRAC	14	SS
2	Dasherhat Chara	Kurigram	<i>Beel</i>	BRAC	12	SS
3	Shashikor <i>Beel</i>	Madaripur	<i>Beel</i>	BUS	10	SS
4	Kaliganga River	Bagherhat	River	Nabolok	12	S
5	Padma Narisha Ujanjala	Dhaka	River	Proshika	4	S
6	Ichamati River	Pabna	River	GMF	60	SS
7	Ghagot River	Gaibandha	River	TMSS	12	S
8	Jagannathpur Kole	Kushtia	<i>Beel</i>	DCHDO	14	SS
9	Tangaon River	Thakurgaon	River	BRAC	8	S
10	Boro <i>Beel</i>	Pabna	<i>Beel</i>	BRAC	35	SS
11	Bangali Nadi	Bogra	River	TMSS	11	S
12	<i>Beel</i> Gawha	Nawabganj	River	BRAC	4	SSH

1 S = Sanctuary alone, SS = Sanctuary & stocking, SSH = Sanctuary, Stocking & Habitat Restoration

If we ignore the habitat restoration site of *Beel* Gawha, the sites are almost evenly distributed between only sanctuary and stocking plus sanctuary sites. Five of the project sites are *beels* while the rest are rivers. That BRAC sites were over-represented is a matter of coincidence. Small NGOs account for 25% of the sites (BUS, Nabolok, and DCHDO). Thus most of the sites involved large NGOs.

The author was assisted by a six research assistants specialised on PRA techniques. While the author independently led the whole team, a guideline for the study methodology was designed by Aeron-Thomas (2003a) from the FFP. This methodology involved gathering information from the water body level, village level and finally to household level. Fisheries plans were studied along with fishing practices, property rights structure etc. to locate households most affected by project intervention. The FFP supplied us with what was referred to as “project file” that provided basic information about the site, water body map, field visit notes of project managers (i.e. mainly the TA team), NGO report to the FFP and so on. We were also provided with the benchmark database that consisted information on type of fishers, their concentration in project villages, some socio-economic data. The study was not designed to investigate the involvement of the NGOs in the FFP. Information about NGOs and other community institutions were collected for the purpose of studying project impact, processes and institutions. This helped us to position the NGOs within an overall context of local property relations associated with fishing along with those of state and other project institutions. The NGOs were required to support these community institutions and the team had to interact with the NGOs for the study.

Though there are 49 water bodies in the FFP, the project was operational in about 45 sites. Therefore, 27% of the FFP water bodies were studied. This number is less important when we consider the fact that the list of the sites studied came out of a process of purposive sampling done on the basis of higher impact expected by the project managers, not by those who conducted the actual study.

The main conclusions of this paper will be drawn from the case studies of all the studied sites presented in section 6. Each case study will present the history of property rights, the physical characteristics of the resource system, a description of the role of community institutions and the intervention outcome. But before that we will describe the institutional domain developed by the FFP.

## **5. THE FOURTH FISHERIES PROJECT**

The Fourth Fisheries Project is the largest fisheries project in Bangladesh. The Project is being implemented by the Department of Fisheries, Ministry of Fisheries & Livestock, with the assistance of partner NGOs (hereafter, PNGOs). The Project is supported by the Government of Bangladesh and multiple donor agencies. The World Bank is providing core financial support and DFID is providing Technical Assistance and resources for contracting partner NGOs, training, and support for alternative livelihoods. Additionally, the GEF (Global Environmental Facility) is funding technical assistance, studies, and training. It is a 5-year project and became officially effective in December 1999. However, actual implementation did not start until January 2000 (Begum 2004, p.1).

The objectives of the FFP are (DOF 2003, paragraph 26.b.1.2):

- a. “to improve the access of poor people to aquatic resources for food and income
- b. to improve the capacity of local users to manage aquatic resources in a sustainable and equitable fashion
- c. to sustain and enhance the production of fish and shrimp by small-scale producers
- d. to improve employment opportunities and incomes of small-scale producers
- e. to improve the capacity of the Department of Fisheries, and other concerned public sector agencies, to effectively support private sector fisheries”

All these objectives would be achieved through a series of technical (compensatory and mitigatory) and social interventions involving development of sustainable community-based institutions (DOF 2003, paragraph 26.b.1.3),

“improvement of inland open-water fisheries management through the development of sustainable, community-based institutions and supporting them in undertaking a program of adaptive management of their fisheries resources using technical measures such as stock enhancement of floodplain fisheries, restoration of fisheries habitats, establishment of fish sanctuaries, and construction of fish passes.”

All these interventions involve costs the community institutions have to incur during the course of the project and after.

## 5.1 FINANCIAL COSTS

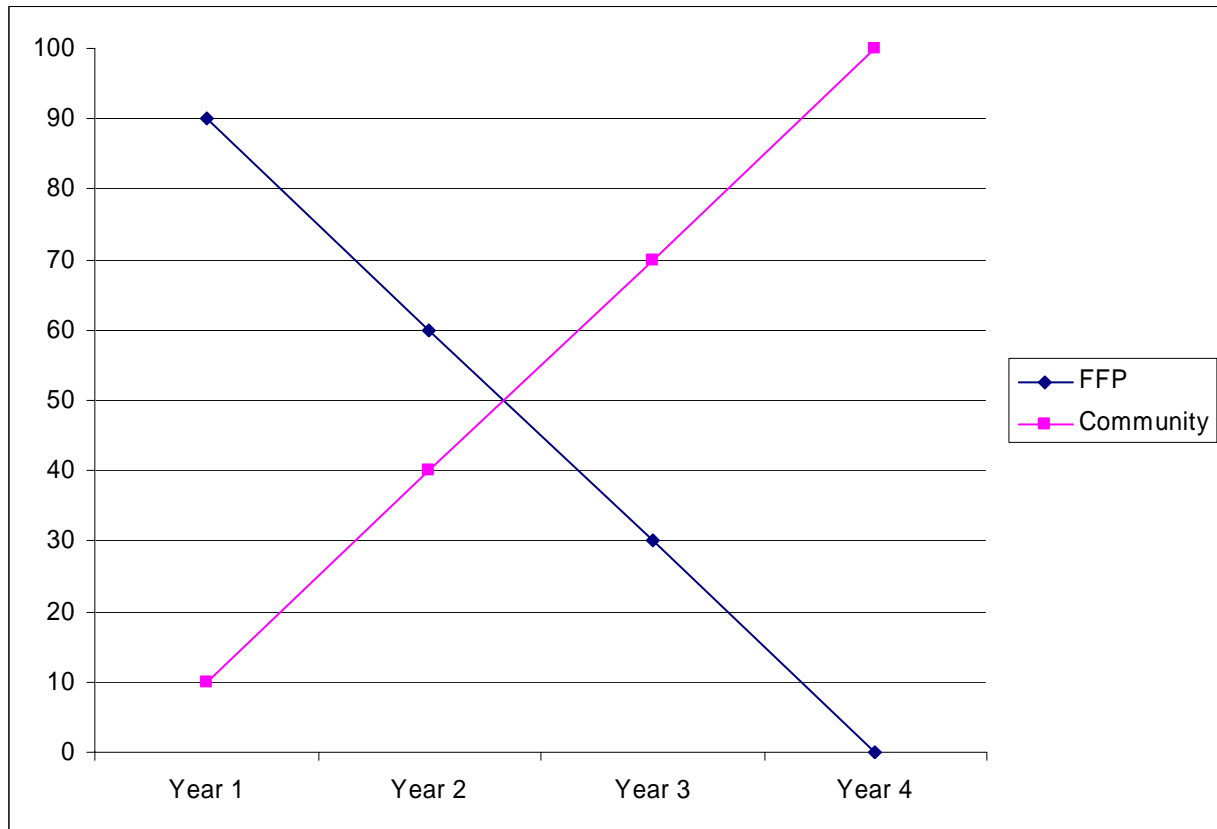
Financial costs of these interventions to the community vary by the type of intervention as well by leasing conditions. In project water bodies (hereafter, PWBs) previously under leasing arrangement, the community had to pay for the lease by an amount agreed by the MOFL and MOL during the time of transfer of the water bodies from the latter to the former. The FFP did not make any contribution to the community institutions towards meeting leasing costs. Thus the water bodies under the open access system before the FFP were handed over to the project free of leasing costs and remained so. This is the case with most FFP sites with sanctuary type intervention alone. In the case of sanctuary, the entire costs for its construction are provided by the project. These include a guard shed cum training centre, demarcation of sanctuary area, brush piles, a country boat, and some furniture and bill boards. The maintenance of these capital goods and the sanctuary was the responsibility of the community institutions.

Most stocking sites involved payment of lease by the community involved to the state. The stocking costs are shared between the project and the community institutions with the share of the project gradually coming down and that of the community going up over the course of the project (Figure 1). In the first year<sup>15</sup> the state contributed 90% of stocking costs, 60% in the second and 30% in the third. The residual is always paid by the community institutions. The subsidy is withdrawn in the fourth year (or fourth stocking) when the community had to bear the entire cost of stocking. The fingerlings were supplied by private contractors for the FFP part while the community institutions managed to gather the fingerlings through various means. The Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) took the responsibility of contracting out habitat restoration activities to private agents under an agreement with the DOF. Habitat intervention mainly involved re-excavation of the silted up part of the PWBs rather than re-establishing migration routes of fishes from the *beel* and the rivers. All these interventions are contracted out to private agents. The community had no choice on the type of intervention (sanctuary, sanctuary plus stocking, sanctuary plus stocking plus habitat restoration). It was solely determined by the FFP. The community institutions hardly had any role to play in the selection of the private supplier of fingerlings and the sanctuary materials provided by the contractor. Thus FFP is a project that involved the community not during the design stage but during the implementation stage of the project. This must have affected project performance. For example, this reduced the time the NGOs had to involve with the community for developing their institutions.

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<sup>15</sup> Or the first stocking, because many sites could not stock every year.

**Figure 1 Sharing stocking cost by FFP and community**



The project explicitly considers “community-based institutions” as a vehicle for fisheries management and aimed at making them “sustainable”. Thus it is important to have a look at the organisational structure of these community institutions.

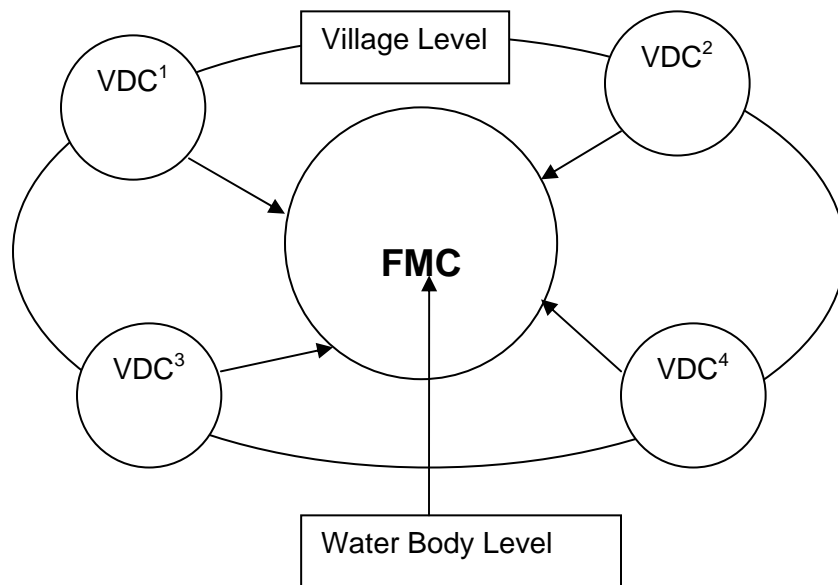
## **5.2 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS**

Initial contact by the project with the community was done through the NGO called BRAC. BRAC was contracted as the survey NGO to, inter alia: check the ecological suitability of the site and, through a six (or more) stage programme of village visits, raise awareness of the project and form “a truly representative Village Level Committee”. Subsequently, implementation of CBO support was often provided by other NGOs (both local and national), who were commissioned in each site. At some sites BRAC continued (Aeron-Thomas 2003b, p. 20).

The FFP created two types of community institutions, the Village Development Committees or the VDCs and the Fisheries Management Committees or the FMCs. The VDCs are the primary organisations at the village level and the FMC is the only institution at the water body level. The VDCs operate at the village level and the FMC operate at the water body level (Figure 2). Each FFP water body involves a listed set of villages surrounding it and the community institutions are first formed with the households living in these villages. Each participating village has only one

VDC. The VDCs were formed by the NGO BRAC during the initial stage of the FFP. BRAC was involved from the beginning of the project for conducting household surveys for the baseline database along with other activities. They also formed the FMC by taking one member from each VDC in the project villages.

**Figure 2 Community institutions of the FFP**



Besides creating a mechanism for the selection of FMC representative, the main role of the VDCs is to develop and co-ordinate development activities at the village level and to assist the FMCs in all aspects of their activities. The main role of the FMCs is to mobilise resources for meeting leasing and stocking costs (where applicable) besides other costs such as running the office, hiring guards and so on. The main function of the FMCs is to design a Fisheries Management Plan (hereafter, FMP) and implement it with active support from the NGO and the DOF. The FMP includes information on proposed use of fishing gear, restricted season or gear, stocking plan etc. It is the blueprint on the basis of which the PWB would be managed. The FMC could also modify the FMP and make institutional changes by adopting different by-laws as and when necessary. A VDC is headed by an executive committee comprising of three office bearers – President, Secretary and the Treasurer. The same structure is applicable to the FMCs.

While non-fishers could join the community institutions such as the VDCs and the FMCs, the main project beneficiaries are the fishers. The fishers are classified in to three categories. The professional fishers (those who fish on a regular basis for selling), occasional fishers (those who fish seasonally primarily for selling) and subsistence fishers (those who fish primarily for home consumption). Thus the project institutions have a basic contradiction in design. While the beneficiaries are the fishers but the institutions are open to non-fishers. This made the community institutions fragile to capture attempts and this did not escape the eyes of the project managers at a very early stage of the project as reported below.

### 5.3 ELITE CAPTURE OF COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

That the project institutions were already captured by the elites became apparent to the project managers almost from the onset of the project. Begum (2001, p. 5) reported that “The VDCs in general, are dominated by local influential and non-fishers ... Genuine fishers and the landless poor have nominal presence in the VDCs.” Regarding the community institution of the FMCs, Begum (2001, p. 8) stated that, “The original composition of a vast majority of the FMCs was extremely disappointing. Presence of fishers in the FMCs was negligible (with one or two exceptions) and some FMCs did not include a single fisher.... As a corrective measure, urgent instructions have been sent to the partner NGOs to reorganise FMCs ensuring at least 50% fisher representation. In addition, it has been made mandatory that out of the three FMC office bearers two must be professional fishers.” Begum (2001) rightly pointed out two factors responsible for this unexpected outcome: inadequate time allocated for community mobilisation prior to the formation of VDCs and a lack of an enabling environment to exercise democratic rights due to the local power structure. It was thought that over the course of the project the NGOs would be able to purge the community institutions off the powerful non-fishers but it was soon realised that this was a bad assumption. As Begum (2001, p.5) pointed out,

*One of the priority activities of the partner NGOs is to assess VDC and FMC composition and where necessary reorganise them in consultation with the communities concerned. It was assumed that partner NGOs would have the necessary skills, experience and ability to facilitate a community based fisheries management project. Unfortunately, most of the partner NGOs lacks the necessary skills to work with multiple communities and to bring a consensus among the communities on managing a vast natural resource like open water fisheries*

The VDCs nominated a member to the FMC and it turned out that an elite non-fisher was nominated in most cases (Begum 2001, p. 8)

*Unless specifically targeted, it is extremely difficult for these social groups (project beneficiaries) to be included in organisations like the VDCs. These social groups are less educated, enjoy a lower social status, less articulate and lack a voice on important decisions made at the community level that affect their lives. Even a well intended democratic approach can fail to include these people in the CBOs (community based organisations) as the local power structure creates obstacles for them to exercise their democratic rights to be self-represented. As a matter of fact, socially vulnerable groups themselves tend to nominate the local elite as their representatives due to the local power structure within which they must operate*

This experience of the FFP shows how frail the concept of community is. On the one hand the project tends to become more inclusive by including non-fishers in community institutions but on the other hand it identifies the fishers as the major project beneficiaries. We have seen this problem with IMOF II experience (Section 3). There the issue was the problem of including the subsistence fishers and excluding the non-fishers. Several reasons have been mentioned to rationalise inclusion of the non-fishers. **First**, the non-fishers own land around the water body and hence they can either catch fish from the waters above their private land or construct ditches (*kuas*) where fishes aggregate during declining flood. If this is the case then the project should not either intervene in such areas or took necessary measures so that these non-fishers can not free-ride. In fact, these actors will never contribute if they can trap fishes during receding waters. Above all this does not explain elite capture. The beneficiaries just happened to be elites and owned the neighbouring land. **Second**, withdrawal of water for irrigation may conflict with stocking either during fingerling release or during harvest. Again this does not explain elite capture because it is not the fish that is taken but the water on which the project

has no rights<sup>16</sup>. The issue here is again solving a property rights issue. The project institution can arrange alternative source of irrigation for the farmers. If that is not economically feasible, such sites again should not be included in the project. The very naive assumption that inclusion of non-fishers would reduce resource use conflict and resource capture attempts have to be seriously questioned. **Third**, the non-fishers are expected to prevent poaching in the water bodies. The question is at what price? Normally, the price is giving up rights over water bodies altogether to these non-fishers. The non-fishers could hardly be thought of as benevolent protectors of the rights of the fishers. Power does not persuade to poach; it takes over whatever it finds worth taking.

Actually, and setting aside the issue of elite capture, the main organisational flaw nests in the blueprint for community institution building. The composition of VDCs did not require disproportionate presence of the fishers. The guideline emphasises on proportional representation of all occupational groups. The guideline states that, "The VDCs should be formed with representatives from the cross-sections of the village community, including women and the poor. VDC members from each social and occupational group should be selected by a majority of the people from the concerned groups" (Begum 1991, Annex 1, p. i). The guideline does not also make it explicit that members from other villages cannot be a member of the respective VDC. But the guideline of the FMC makes it explicit that the member representative of the VDC must come from the respective village. Since some rural elite live outside the project village, this guideline might have helped them to get in to the VDC and in poorly managed site, eventually in to the FMC. The guideline also did not require that the representative from the VDC to the FMC had to be a fisher. Therefore, according to the guidelines, it is perfectly legitimate to have an FMC without any representation of the fishers. The managers of the project were surprised and shocked by the relative absence of the fishers in the VDCs, particularly in the FMCs but they failed to realise that this did not contradict the guidelines prepared by no other agent but themselves. They were particularly concern with the community institution of the FMC. Increasing the participation of the fishers in the FMC came as an afterthought patches to the ill formulated design of community institutions. Consequently, to rectify these errors, the VDCs in most FFP sites were clipped and the FMC, controlled by the non-fisher rural elites, was kept alive. The VDCs had to be disabled for many reasons. By design, the role of the VDCs is not well-defined and this fuzzy role is not directly related to fisheries management. Or in other words the VDCs are not guided about their position and role in the management of the water bodies. Guideline 8 states that "The VDCs will be responsible for mobilising local resources, including raising funds, to undertake development activities. The VDCs can approach Government and Non-Government organisations for financial and technical assistance to undertake development activities" (Begum 2001, p. i). A non-fisher dominated FMC turned out to be the only surviving community institution the project could depend on for its implementation. In terms of Figure 2 it means that the institutional root at the village level was undone and all activities were concentrated at the water body level. The original expectations of linking village level institutions with water body level institution had to be compromised at a very high price of curtailing on community participation. Recall that one of the main responsibility of the FMC is to design and implement a Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) and one guideline for the FMC is that the FMP "must be seen as equitable and must secure or enhance the access of the poorest sections of the community to the resource and protect the legitimate interests of professional fishers" (Begum 1991, Annex 2, p. ii).

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<sup>16</sup> This is a typical case of multiple attribute of a resource system and multiple holders of rights over them (see Barzel 1989).



Thus that the elites already captured the community institutions were not a finding from the study undertaken by the author. It was well documented and known to the Project Managers before the author started to work on the study sites. Obviously, the project had fundamental design flaws as mentioned above and for which it is the project managers who would be held responsible. But project institutions would have been taken up by the rural elites in most cases as it actually happened. No project guideline, unless properly formulated and implemented, could have prevented their entry. Historically, these rural elite managed to get heavily involved in to community institutions by violating such guidelines in many instances. But these flawed design of the community institution definitely saved the elites from wasting resources for capturing FFP institutions.

The case studies presented below will help understand elite capture in concrete field setups. Every site has its own power dynamics and property rights configurations and hence it is expected to add to our understanding on what actually went wrong with community empowerment by the NGOs in the FFP.

## **6. THE CASE STUDIES**

There is no single power constellation that characterise all sites. Each site is different from the other as long as the nature of power structure is concerned. This is also determined by other factors such as the physical property of the resource system or broader changes in the local economy. The nature of involvement of the rural elites in establishing their control over the resource system also varied by site. We will therefore describe each site with a focus on the physical characteristics of the resource system, property rights structure in a historical perspective and the role of the NGOs in empowering the project beneficiaries. However, we can classify the sites into those where success was absent or marginal (less successful sites) and those where success was present and noticeable (more successful sites). This will help us to make broader observations mentioned before.

### **6.1 LESS SUCCESSFUL SITES**

#### **6.1.1 Haster Beel**

Haster *beel*, a stocking and sanctuary site, is located in the northwest region of the country between the districts of Joypurhat and Naogaon. The first stocking was done in 2001 and the second in 2002. While the first stocking was washed away because of flash flood the harvest from the second was yet to be totally reaped. Thus it was not possible to make any assessment of the production outcome from stocking. FFP in Haster *beel* started with ten villages in 2001 but this number was eventually downsized to two. The eight villages had to drop out because they did not have professional fishers and they were also not willing to participate in the FFP. Hastabosontopur and Bonogram were the only participating villages. BRAC is the project implementing NGO.

#### Physical Properties

The PWB is a complex resource system. It is a floodplain. Some amount of *khas* land in the middle of the water body retains water for all year round. Two big ponds ideal for stocking are located there. These ponds are isolated from the rest of the water body even in the peak of the wet season. There is some *khas* land around the ponds that is also a hot spot for fishing. It was

only this deeper part of the water body that was affected by the FFP intervention as access was effectively controlled there. The residual part of the PWB remained open for fishing to all.

### Property Rights

The Deputy Commissioner of the district of Joypurhat leased this water body out through auction. It was leased out to Sonamukhi Fisheries Cooperative Society of Hastabosontopur for the period of three years from 1991 to 1993. From 1994 to 1996, the *beel* was managed under the Third Fisheries Project. In 1997, the *beel* was not leased out because the highest bid was too low. In 1998, it was leased out to Mr. Muhit Talukder, an influential person of Adamdighi Thana of the district of Bogra for Tk. 1, 17,000 for a period of three years. Mr. Talukder sub-leased the *beel* to a group of people from the neighbouring village of Baludiar. According to this sub-leasing contract the lessee got 75 percent and the managers or sub-lessees of Baludiar got 25 percent of the total catch. This is how the fishers of Baludiar established effective control over the *beel* during the period immediately before the FFP. The main fishing practice at that time was from *katha* placed in the hot spots. The fishers of Baludiar neither owned the fishing gear required for *katha* fishing nor did they have the skill needed for fishing in the *katha*. They hired fishers from outside their village. Only two fishing villages had fishers having the skill and gears essential for *katha* fishing, Hastabosontopur and Bonogram. They contracted the fishers of Bonogram and consequently the fishers from Hastabosontopur were not allowed to fish in the *beel*. This is the major source of conflict between the professional fishers of Hastabosontopur and the villagers of Baludiar. The conflict could not be settled outside the court and several cases were still pending. Under these circumstances the *beel* was handed over to the DOF in April 2001 for implementing the FFP. The FFP helped the fishers of Hastabosontopur to reclaim their rights over this deeper part of the *beel* back. Now the fishers of Bonogram are marginalised as their patrons lost their rights.

### Livelihood Outcome

Our findings suggest that the benefits of the FFP were going more to the fishers from a reallocation of access rights rather than from improved catch from stocking. Since net benefits generated by the project appeared to be negligible, only a group of fishers benefited at the cost of other fishers. Thus the fishers who acquired rights through FFP gained (Hastabosontopur) whereas those who lost these rights (Bonogram) had to incur a loss.

### FFP Institutions

There were only six persons in the FMC. Three of them were office bearers and the rest were members of the FMC. The cashier and one of the members were from Bonogram. The rest were from Hastabosontopur. There were two VDCs in the two-project village. The total number of VDC members was 91. Amongst them 37 were from Bonogram and 54 were from Hastabosontopur. The dominance of the fishers from Hastabosontopur in the community institutions is therefore clear.

Funds were raised from the members of the VDCs. About 80 fishers contributed and almost all of them were members of the two VDCs. Most of them were also *ber jal* fishers. This provided a simple rule of exclusion. It is only the contributors who were allowed to fish in the deeper part (hot spots) of the *beel*. They were also allowed to participate in harvesting the stocked fish on a catch-sharing basis. Most of the fishers were still taking advantage of the open access conditions in the residual part of the PWB by using relatively low cost fishing gear with low fishing power.

Mohatab Uddin is the president of the FMC. He is a fish *aratdar* or a large fish trader. He is also an elected Commissioner of Akkelpur *Paurashava* or Municipality. He lent money to the FMC when urgently needed. In return almost all the fishes harvested in Haster *beel* are sold through his *arat*. He did not participate in the FMC in any other capacity. Though he has been the president of FMC from the inception of the project, Ramjan Ali is the key person behind all the activities of FMC. He is also the cashier of the FMC. Allocation of gear space and harvesting contracts are done through him. He is also a major supplier of fingerlings to the project.

## NGO

It was reported that BRAC lent Tk. 56,000 to the project. BRAC showed all transactions as micro credit operations with the women of the project villages. Weekly installments were paid by the FMC. FMC is financing installment payments to BRAC from catch and gear fee collection from the members of the VDC.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the villagers were not present during the formation of the VDCs. The cashier of the FMC personally selected the VDC members without consent of others. The cashier of the FMC played a key role in all discussions and proceedings of the project. Therefore the villagers do not have any clear perception about the activities of VDC. They reported that the VDC members came to them when contribution was required for stocking. The villagers did not have any meeting with the FMC on development of the *beel*.

The understanding of fisher communities regarding management options and decision-making was poor. The FMC office bearers and the members received minimal training from the PNGO. They received two days training on maintaining cashbook and one day training on institutional leadership from the implementing NGO. According to the cashier of the FMC these training were not sufficient for managing this type of community-based projects. They needed more training especially on community mobilisation, FMC meeting organisation and writing of the minutes of the meetings.

It is quite clear that the rural elites controlled the FMC and above all they had strong control over supply of the fingerlings and selling of the fish. The actual catching and harvesting of fishes were done by the fishers. There is a typical patron-client relationship between them and the fishers. The FMC leaders allocated fishing rights to their clients. The NGO failed to break this patron-client relationship and in effect strengthened it by providing loans to the FMC in a mysterious way. This helped the FMC to sustain financially. They made no effort to improve the participation of the fishers of Bonogram. Thus they stayed away from the dynamics of power relationships that determined the rights to the fishing ground.

### **6.1.2 Dasherhat Chara**

Dasherhat Chara is an oxbow lake located in the district of Kurigram. This 700 hectare lake was stocked, in 2001 and in 2002, and a sanctuary was also created. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee or BRAC is the implementing NGO.

Kurigram is a poverty prone district in Bangladesh and livelihood options are very limited. Distress driven migration is therefore widespread. The fishers performed worst in both migrating

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<sup>17</sup> This was confirmed to the author personally by the international community specialist who was totally unaware of this activity of BRAC.

and diversifying their livelihoods. To make matter worse, the access of the fishers to fishing grounds had been diminishing over time in the project villages because gradually they were brought under aquaculture. Some of the fishers started to depend on seasonal fishing grounds formed in the wet season in low privately owned agricultural lands. But that resulted in overcrowding. These water bodies cannot be fished for more than four months. The expansion of aquaculture converted a large number of fishers to wage labourers. They now fish on a contract basis for harvesting ponds and other closed water bodies such as the oxbow lakes. The FFP did not change this general trend – it intensified the changes already taking place in Dasherhat Chara in an overall context described above.

### Property Rights

Elite capture has been a part and parcel of the history of property rights over this water body. People from the districts of Rangpur and even Dhaka gained rights over the PWB directly or indirectly in the past. Control over the water body was contingent on many factors such as connection with the local administration, political power-brokers, local elites and local leaders of fishers co-operative. Besides being a part of the Third Fisheries Project, the project water body was also managed by the BRDB. It is claimed that many individuals held *de facto* rights over the water body when it was under the TFP and the BRDB. Thus control over the water body was not stable and no single individual dominated the water body since the 1990s. Rights over the water body were long lost by the fishers.

### Livelihood Outcome

The FMC imposed a *de facto* gear ban in lieu of proposed gear restriction that almost entirely curtailed access rights of the fishers to the project water body. This had serious livelihoods consequences. The fishers had to undertake less rewarding livelihood strategies. They moved to marginal fishing grounds in search of fish but overcrowded them in the process. Their women left home for work for wages – an activity by women never liked by the fishers. Children were under-attended as the women spent more time outside home. Incomes eroded. Many fishers had to drop meals. They had to borrow from informal lenders at very high interest rates and some had to sell assets.

### FFP Institutions

The water body was managed by an oligarchy of local power elites. They had a very strong working relationship amongst themselves. The FMC has eleven members. Only one member has changed since it was formed. We have found that six members of the FMC were present or past lessees of the project or other water bodies. Four of them were involved in fish aquaculture in other oxbow lakes. Of these four, two were office-bearers.

The FMC raised funds through capital subscription. This is a common practice in other oxbow lakes around the PWB. However, these funds were raised by the FMC without much participation by the fishers. Only 10 per cent of the contributors were fishers and accounted for 8% of total contribution. Either they stayed away or the FMC excluded them. But the process was not transparent. Some of the contributors came from outside the project villages but on paper they were shown coming from the project villages. The VDC and FMC members contributed about a quarter of the funds raised through this method. The FMC settled the accounts in the second year. These happened in a context when the FMC performed very badly during the second stocking. Stocking costs increased while the amount of catch and the

monetary value of the catch declined disproportionately. The fishers and the contributors started to seriously question the credibility and integrity of the members of the FMC. A group of fishers were organised and a parallel FMC was formed. The project households were getting divided on many issues relating to the FFP. Many villagers assertively said that the FMC was not able to bring any well-being to them through this project. They started to believe that the present FMC was no longer required for this project. Instead, the real fishers who can bring benefit to them should form an FMC.

The VDCs' did not meet on a regular basis. The VDC members were reluctant about the activity of the VDCs. A conflict sprang up amongst the members of the FMC and the VDCs. Currently there is no interaction between them. It was alleged that the FMC has dissolved all the VDCs.

## NGO

BRAC, the implementing NGO, failed to resolve many conflicts that emerged during the course of development of the FFP in this site. It always sided with the FMC and slowly stopped to work with the VDCs. We encountered extremely audacious behaviour from members of the FMC on several occasions and in several places. Such behaviour also came from the team leader of the implementing NGO. In many instances we were moving like a tennis ball from the office of the SUFO to those of the implementing NGO when we requested for any document or information. Some of the members of the FMC was extremely rude and did not help us to have a fruitful discussion with them. There was a mutual feeding of authority and power between the NGO members and those of the FMC. The members of the FMC said they were overworked and getting no benefit from the project. When asked why they were not leaving the FFP they said they were still there upon request from the NGO team leader.

There was an observed lack of clarity of the contract between the contributors and the members of FMC and VDCs. The project institutions were not also transparent. No receipts were given to the contributors. No terms and conditions were written down. During the time of raising funds through contribution the contributors had a very vague idea about the project. The contributors did not know whether they were investing for a year or for the life span of the project. It turned out that they invested for two years because after that time the FMC settled all accounts with them and started to look for new contributors. During the settlement the value of fishes given to the contributors for home consumption was deducted from the calculation of profits that were eventually distributed. This was strongly resented by the contributors. The implementing NGO failed to aware the contributors and the fishers about the objective of the project. A signboard in important meeting points such as the markets could be used to display the objectives of the FFP. A notice board in front of the office of the FMC could display the important information such as the amount of fingerlings stocked, value of catch, and other revenue and expenditure items. The implementing NGO also failed to raise awareness amongst the project households and to mobilise them.

The Dasherhat case showed that output gains were achieved at the cost of distribution losses where the fishers were marginalised and deprived. The livelihoods impact on the fishers was dismal as they lost fishing rights to the fishing ground. No credit support was given to them. The FMC was captured by the rural elites and the implementing NGO reinforced their power base and kept the community in the dark.

### 6.1.3 Shashikor Beel

Shashikor *beel* is located in the district of Madaripur. It is divided into two parts: Bagmara and Kalaitola. An embankment chipped off the Bagmara part from the rest of the *beel*. The total area of the *beel* is 1,000 ha of which the Bagmara part accounts for about 20%. The project intervened here through stocking in 2001 and 2002. While there are many escaping routes in the Kalaitola part of the *beel*, there is only one in Bagmara. It was well taken care of by the FMC before stocking. This stocking was done mainly in Bagmara because fishes cannot go out of Bagmara once they are in. Bohumukhi Unnayan Samity (BUS) is the implementation NGO for the Shashikor *beel* project.

#### Physical Properties

Shashikor *beel* is essentially a stretch of private land in the floodplains. It is not a *jalkar* or in other words it was never leased out by the state or by any large landowner. It becomes a water body only when flooded in the wet season. There are some large and small canals. The local government leased some of them out while others were not and they remained virtually open.

The main fishing is done in the waters over the privately held land in the wet season. There are two aspects to it. **First**, access is free during peak of the flood. But there was an unwritten rule. The households in one village would not go for fishing in another. Or in other words there was a village-based territorial fishing rights system in operation in the PWB. Thus it was *de facto* a common property resource in the wet season. **Second**, landowners have a large number of *kuas* in the deeper parts of the *beel*, where fish take shelter as the water level drops. *Kua* are deeper parts of the *beel* privately owned. It is during flood recession that the common property rights are contested. Thus the *kua* owners reap a major part of the benefits. But this private right over fishing is limited to a month or two. For the rest of the fishing season, access is guided by the norms of the village-based territorial rights. This pattern of property rights were only disturbed in the Bagmara part. The rest of the *beel* did not witness any change in access rights and fishing pattern.

#### Livelihood Outcome

A five month fishing ban was imposed following stocking in Bagmara. This restricted fishers at the time of year when they previously earned most from fishing. For the entire period of the ban the affected households adopted a mix of coping strategies to make up for the income lost. Some sold assets such as land. But this was open only to those who owned some land. Others took recourse to informal borrowing at a very high rate of interest. They were caught in a vicious circle of debt – borrowing from one source to repay loans taken from another. Livelihoods diversification was common and driven by poverty. Members of affected households had to take occupations they never took before or not to the extent they had to undertake after the ban. Above all, many households had to drop one meal or two a day frequently. These households who could not fish derived no benefits from the fishing ban.

#### FFP Institutions

Two important events took place just before our field visit. **First**, there was a change in the composition of the FMC. **Second**, stocking for 2003 was postponed and Shashikor now remains

only as a sanctuary site.<sup>18</sup> The project households were not aware of these developments. They only witnessed the construction of the sanctuary. Most of the households had no idea about sanctuaries, how it would benefit them and when.

The representation of the fishing community to the FMC at the office bearer level has always been absent. These positions were grabbed by the rural elites. A person called Ahad who comes from outside the project villages played the key role in shaping the activities of the FMC. He is a trader, contractor by profession and he is also involved in other activities. That the FMC pursued a less transparent mode of operation therefore did not come as a surprise. They were secretive, conspiratorial and unaccountable. They did not record their financial transactions systematically.

It is a common knowledge that FMC, NGO, and the SUFO prepared the FMP and the activity plans. There was no participation from either the fishers or the members of the VDCs. One main objective of the FMP was to establish the rights of the fishers over the fishing ground. The FMP does not say anything about how the rights were lost and to whom and when. Shashikor *beel* enjoyed a long period of *de facto* common property rights configurations where the fishers always had access to the fishing ground in the wet season. What happened was that the rights of the fishers were grabbed by the FMC by imposing a closed season in only Bagmara. The ban on fishing was enforced not by community participation but by intimidation and threat.

The members of the FMC and the field staff of the NGO talked over tea on various issues in the Shashikor bazaar. They did not make any visit to the project villages. The VDCs were inactive and the FMC or the NGO did not bother to activate them. Rampant corruption with stocking the *beel* was the main gossip in the local bazaars.

## NGO

BUS is a local NGO, and it was established in 1986. It was registered with the NGO Bureau in 1987. BUS has its central office at Nabagram in Kalkini Upazilla under Madaripur district. BUS engaged one team leader and three field workers for this site. The team leaders changed at least four times before we started our work in this site. The education, skill and training of their staff were poor and above all they were not motivated. This NGO hardly gave any effort to develop community institutions. For example, BUS did not undertake appropriate measures to solve the problems faced by the VDCs because they focused more on strengthening the FMC. The size of the FMC was raised from 9 to 20 members.

In Shashikar *beel* we have thus witnessed a common pattern of rural elites taking over community institutions and the NGO facilitating the process of this takeover. The central issue was not the management of the PWB but grabbing of the project funds that came to the control of the local elites.

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<sup>18</sup> We later gathered that this was done to discipline the leaders of the FMC and the implementing NGO. This was also done in other stocking plus sanctuary sites at a later stage of the project but we do not have any detail information on that.

#### 6.1.4 Kaliganga River

The water body Kaliganga consists of parts of the River Kaliganga, Chitra and the Donger *Khal*. It is located in the district of Bagerhat. The Fourth Fisheries Project started here in 2000 and intervened by constructing several sanctuaries. The implementing NGO is Nabolok – one of the large numbers of small NGOs in Bangladesh.

##### Physical Properties

The PWB has some unique features. **First**, the Kaliganga part of the project is almost dead – it is difficult for a fisher to sustain a livelihood contingent on the stock of fish available there. In contrast, the Chitra is vibrant. It is the main source of saline water and naturally produced shrimp fingerlings used in neighbouring shrimp farms. **Second**, shrimp aquaculture is the major source of livelihoods and the project households have diversified their livelihoods towards shrimp aquaculture and on activities linked to it. **Third**, the households living in the project villages are all Hindu and divided into two castes: the *Nomosudras* and the *Rajbongshis*. The former has been traditionally involved in farming and the latter in fishing. As the fertility of Kaliganga waned and the dependence of the households on Chitra grew – caste norms started to crumble. The *Nomosudras* maintained a higher social status and down looked upon the caste of fishers. Slowly with the passage of time the *Nomosudras* started to take up fishing. This happened due to demographic pressure, falling income from rice farms and rapid expansion in shrimp farming.

##### Property Rights

A major conflict surfaced after part of the Chitra River got annexed to the PWB. Fishers living around the Chitra part contested this and took a legal course to resolve the conflict. They lost the case but rejected the verdict. The FMC had no control over this part of the PWB. *De jure* this part was under PWB but *de facto* it was managed on the basis of local rules and norms that persisted immediately before the intervention of the FFP. The fishers here established strong territorial rights.

This PWB used to be leased out as two *jalmahals*: the Kendua *jalmahal* and Chitra *jalmahal*. The Kendua *jalmahal* included the Kaliganga River, the Kendua *beel*, and five other small *beels*. The Chitra *jalmahal* included the Chitra River along with some adjacent *beels*. The Kendua *jalmahal* was last leased out as a closed water body in 1996 to Faltita-Shialikanda Fisherman's' Cooperative Society for a period of three years. This *jalmahal* was divided into several segments of water bodies for sub-leasing. The Kaliganga part was divided into six parts and sub-leased in by the professional fishers. They established *de facto* leasing rights. These rights were well recognised by the community and well enforced by the right holders. The fishers gained fishing rights by payment of toll to the sub-leaseholders.

According to the District Land Office of Bagerhat Kuliardiar Fishers Cooperative Society was leasing in the Chitra *jalmahal* since 1987. A broker by the name of Chittoranjan Mridha obtained this lease and transferred rights over a part of the water body to the fishers belonging to the Kolkolia Fishers Cooperative Society (KFCS). Later the KFCS established territorial rights over Chitra *jalmahal* by taking advantage of the Open Access Policy of 1995. They had to withstand against several capture attempts made by previous leaseholders and others. They finally had to resolve this conflict over fishing rights in the formal court. The fishers had to pay for the litigation



costs. Since then KFCS established their territorial rights over Chitra River, particularly over some 88 acres now under the FFP. The Kolkolia Fishers Society did not accept the inclusion of Chitra in the FFP and considered this as an act of encroachment of their property rights.

The history of property rights over the PWB indicates that the fishers had achieved locally recognised property rights over them. They also established local norms that minimised conflict amongst fishers over space and access to the water body. These norms were slowly weakening over time. The fishers either had to succumb to elite capture or contest it. But the fact remains that these capture attempts were sometimes challenged. The Kolkolia Fisheries Cooperative society and the Faltita-Shialikanda Fishers Cooperative society played a major role in this process. These cooperatives were registered in 1972. Their membership size is 212 and 103 respectively. The members are all *Rajbongshis* or *jeles*. The Upazilla Cooperative Office remarked to us that these cooperatives are still “active” implying they were concerned about their rights. Though these MSS (Matshajibi Samabaya Samity or Fishers’ cooperatives) in most cases were used as a vehicle for leasing in the water bodies by non-fishers but they played some role to ensure informal and sometimes formal property rights of the fishers over these water bodies.

### Livelihood Outcome

The project hardly had any impact on the fishers. The Kaligana part is inappropriate for sanctuary and the fishers there had already diversified their livelihoods. Only few who could not were affected to some extent. They are old fishers and fished mainly with lift nets.

### FFP Institutions

There are 14 villages in this project site. The FMC is comprised of 14 members. Each village has its representative in the FMC. Participation of fishers is almost absent in the FMC. Out of a total of 14 members only one member is a *Rajbongshi jele*. The FMC is dominated by the *Nomosudras* who are involved in shrimp farming (6 members) and agriculture (4). Only two of them are fishers. The president of FMC is a shrimp-framer.

There are 14 VDCs. The number of members of these VDCs ranges from 9 to 16. There are altogether 170 members in these VDCs. Amongst them 163 are Hindus and 3 are Muslims. The *Nomosudras* dominated (83%) these institutions. The actual fishers by caste - the *Rajbongshis jeles* - constituted only 9% of total membership of the VDCs.

It would be interesting to compare the distribution of caste in the study villages and their representation in respective VDCs. In Shialikanda, 34% of the households were *Nomosudras* whereas 73% of VDC members from this village were *Nomosudras*. Similarly, in Kolkolia, 69% of the households were *Nomosudras* but 96% of the VDC members from that village were *Nomosudras*. Most of the members were either involved in agriculture (27%) or in shrimp farming (22%). Only 9% of them were fishers.

Thus there are three important features in the membership pattern of the VDCs. **First**, non-fishers dominated them. **Second**, these non-fishers were mainly involved in shrimp farming and agriculture. This would imply that most of them own agricultural lands. **Third**, it had disproportionately large representation from the *Nomosudras*. Thus they were likely to serve the interest of the non-fishers, landowners, shrimp-farmers and the *Nomosudras*.

## NGO

A small local NGO (Nabolok) has been working as the implementing NGO. Their activities are more concentrated in the Kaliganga part of the water body where there are apparently no capture attempts from the non-fishers. They could hardly organise the fishers living in the project villages.

We found that people vaguely know that a fisheries project was being implemented here. They interpreted and understood this as Suren's project. Suren is the president of the FMC. Many think this as a part of the project in Kenduar *beel* – a neighbouring FFP site. They knew well that an NGO is involved with this project but failed to talk about the type of activities they performed. Villagers hardly knew the members of the FMC and the VDCs. For example, in Goalbari village, a VDC member knew that he was a member of a committee but failed to mention the name of the committee.

During the initial phase of the project, some villagers participated in the meetings called by BRAC – the survey NGO responsible for baseline-survey and formation of community institutions. Later most of them did not follow the development as they lost interest in FFP and the activities of the NGOs waned. They have heard of or observed construction of the sanctuaries but they did not have any participation in this process. They also said they did not have any idea about the rules and regulations of this project. Most of the participants in our opinion survey believed that this is Suren Sikdar's project and he and his cronies would enjoy all the benefits of this project. This project would not be able to bring any good to them.

The FMP and its implementation had been, at best, a farce. It banned *patagoras* (trap) and seine nets but the implementing NGO is now regularly collecting data for catch assessment for these fishing gears.

On the face of it all the actors of community management are there in this FFP site: the FMC, the VDCs, and the implementing NGO. The state is also there in the Upazilla Sadar: the TNO, SUFO and so on. Others are a bit far away – in the districts of Bagerhat and Dhaka. But they remain foreign to the project households. They are neither trusted nor respected but strongly suspected by the project households. The small local NGO got intermeshed with these webs of formal and informal institutions. These institutions only worked well to facilitate transfer of residual resources from the power elites in the centre to the power elites at the local level.

### **6.1.5 Padma Narisha Unjanjala (PNU)**

The PWB is called Padma Narisha Ujanjala (PNU). It is located in Dohar Upazilla under the district of Dhaka. The PWB is a part of the River Padma separated by a large *charland*<sup>19</sup>. This separation happened about half a decade ago. The PWB appears as an alienated entity from the River Padma only in the dry season. The length and width of this water body is 5 kilometres and 300-400 metre respectively. There are four villages in the project. The FFP intervention here involved construction of a sanctuary. The implementing NGO is Proshika – one of the biggest NGOs in Bangladesh.

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<sup>19</sup> A patch of land raised in the river bed.

## Property Rights

Access to the PWB for fishing was free before the FFP but the local elite were involved in organised poaching. The poachers were harboured by the rural elites. The PWB was plagued by confrontations amongst the fishers on the issue of access. It frequently took place between the fishers of the village of Meghula and the project villages. This conflict caused bloodshed in a number of occasions. Once the PWB was brought under the FFP, the fishers of Meghula lost their access to it completely.

*Katha* fishing plays an important role in the PWB. Fishing in *katha* requires special skill. The fishers in the study villages do not have this skill. Hindu professional fishers from Meghula do *katha* fishing. Meghula is located near to the PWB but it is not a project village. The outsiders of the project villages own most of the *kathas*.

## Livelihood Outcome

The FMC enforced a seven month long ban on all fishing gear. This was done in sharp violation of the rules explicitly stated in the FMP. As a result all the fishers from the project villages lost their fishing rights in the PWB during the period of the fishing ban. This resulted in lost fishing days, reduced income, and increased uncertainty about the rights of the fishers over the PWB. However, this did not affect the livelihoods of most of the fishers because the local economy was strong, some professional and occasional fisher households owned land, and there were a large number of alternative fishing grounds where the fishers retained their rights of access. As a whole the loss of income at the aggregate level was marginal.

## FFP Institutions

The FFP in the PWB included four villages. There are therefore four VDCs. The total number of members of all the VDCs is 58. On the other hand the FMC is made of nine members. Project activities of the FMC are almost absent. It appears that the FMC was not formed following the FFP guidelines. Most of the members of the FMC are non-fishers.

The leadership of the FMC is captured by the local elites. The president of the FMC is Shamshul Alam Mollah. He is a village doctor and agriculture is his secondary occupation. Recently he has donated land for the construction of the office for the FMC<sup>20</sup>. The FMC has selected a place for constructing a shed for the guards and for building an office room. But they have no funds for constructing them. They are waiting for funds from Dhaka. In the absence of an office room, meetings have so far taken place in private rooms. Jashim Mollah, his younger brother, is a wealthy farmer. He is also a member of the FMC.

Most passive members of the FMC and the VDCs are disappointed with the project process and outcome. When approached for any routine information on the FFP they either kept mum or referred us to Shamshul Alam Mollah, the president of the FMC or his brother Jashim. At the time of our study, hardly any institutional or organisational activity of the FMC was observed. The general members of the FMC were not interested to participate in the activities of the FMC.

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<sup>20</sup> This should not be looked upon as an act in philanthropy. "In order to create the appearance of participation entrepreneurs might use spend resources to build community centres, hold rallies, and initiate showcase labor-intensive activities." (Conning and Kevane 2002, p. 383).

Most of the members thought they would not get any benefit from the project. All benefits would go to the political leaders and local elites who have already captured the FMC.

The political leaders and the so-called cadres are controlling the project. They are either inside the FMC or outside of it but maintaining a tacit relationship with the insiders. It has been claimed that they arranged organised fishing by the fishers coming from outside the project villages in exchange for money or fish. This was allegedly done inside the sanctuary too. Moreover, strong allegations of corruption against the FMC leaders and the representatives of the implementing NGO made the fishers suspicious about the implementation of FFP in this site.

## NGO

Proshika is entrusted with the responsibility of implementing FFP activities in this FFP site, particularly those related to providing community institution support. Proshika deployed two field staff. One of them is a team leader and the other is a field assistant. Both of them were new in this type of project. They had no previous experience in working in fisheries project. Thus the Proshika staff at the field level lacked experience, skill, and commitment to the project objectives.

The NGO members also misled us and either did not provide required information or provided us with distorted information. The list of the FMC members provided by the NGO showed that there were six fisher-members in the FMC when actually there was almost no representation of fishers in the FMC.

In this FFP site the influential and wealthier households were enjoying the benefits of the FFP. The implementing NGO allegedly took a share from the benefit of the project. The katha fishers or the katha owners allegedly bribed the FMC and the members of the implementing NGO an amount of Tk 20,000 for the right to fish in the katha. According to some villagers of Debinagar and Kulchori, the UFO, local police, and the NGO team leader took most benefits from the project.

The experience of the FFP in PNU shows how the rural elites have totally excluded the fishing community living in the project villages. They were refrained from fishing and hired fishers from outside the project areas were allowed to catch fish in the PWB. Thus the project beneficiaries lost but borne the cost of the project (loss of access rights) while some distant fishers benefited (by gaining access) to some extent and the major benefits were reaped by the non-fishers. A thriving local economy and existence of alternative fishing grounds helped the fishers from the project village to cope with the loss of access rights to the PWB.

### **6.1.6 Ghagot River**

The Ghagot River is located in the Sadar Upazilla of the north-eastern district of Gaibandha. The FFP intervened here through creation of four sanctuaries in the third year of the project. The Tengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha (TMSS) is the implementing NGO.

#### Physical Properties

The PWB is a part of the Ghagot River. The main river branches out from the Tista River near Jaldhaka Upazilla of the district of Nilphamari. Ghagot is a meandering river. The PWB flows from the east towards the west and passes through the project villages. The PWB has

embankments on both sides to protect the neighbouring villages from flooding. The length of the PWB is 7.5 kilometres and the area 70 hectares, though much dries up.

### Property Rights

The oral history of fishing rights over the PWB suggests that it is a water body less prone to capture attempts from outside. Capture attempts from non-fishers ended in 1972. The fishers generally had access rights to the PWB from 1973 when some local co-operatives started to develop and establish rights over the PWB. But these co-operatives were unregistered and the leaders of the cooperatives derived rent from the fishers. The open access policy helped the fishers to have some control over the water body although they were exposed to various claims made by others. The absence of rules was manifested in the way *katha* fishing was done in this river. At the time of our study it was guided by the principle of “might makes right”. But the rights to fish in the *dohos* were specified by existing norms of power and privileges. It was in these *dohos* the FFP wanted to create the sanctuaries.

The main fishing in Ghagot was done by *kathas* set in the deeper parts of the river, where water stayed throughout the year. These were owned by non-fishers but harvested by professional fishers. Fishers also used cast nets in large numbers and some lift nets, locally known as *khora*.

### Livelihood Outcome

*Kathas* were removed at a stage when the *katha* season was coming to an end in 2003. The removal of *kathas* did not have any noticeable effect on the *katha* owners in terms of catch because main harvesting had, by that stage, already been completed. This delayed the process of acquiring the sites earmarked for sanctuaries.

*Khoras* were removed. The well-off *khora* owners could cope with this ban because of their initial wealth positions but the poor *khora* fishers suffered to some extent. They sometimes had to drop breakfast and quality of food purchased declined; savings and spending on religious festivals were both reduced; and essentials had to be purchased on credit from local grocery shops. But this impact was not too strong because the *khora* fishers were already having multiple sources of income because catch in the PWB was declining and *khora* fishing was done for a very short period of four months in a year with high variability in catch.

### FFP Institutions

The CBOs were not functioning, with almost any trace being left of the VDCs. People living in the project villages had only a vague idea about the project. The FMC also failed in many ways. The president of the FMC was also the secretary of the fishers' co-operative that controlled the PWB before the FFP. The new institutional arrangements and objectives introduced by the project seemed, however, to have little impact on his behaviour. His primary interest was toll collection from the fishers, as it had been before. Little was done to convince them of the benefits of the FFP interventions. As a result, the fisher neither saw the benefits of FFP intervention nor believed in it. They were lacking faith on the FMC and NGO leadership.

This FFP site experienced several reshuffles in the composition of the FMC. The first FMC was formed with six members in March 2001. Later it was reorganised in May 2002 with a giant size of 28 members. A month later the size of FMC membership was reduced to 16. Even in 2002 several members were replaced on various grounds that include non-cooperation, abstention from attending FMC meetings regularly and so on. The list of members obtained from the FMC

showed that 14 out of 16 members including the office bearers were fishers either by the first occupation or by the second. But our investigation in different villages revealed that only three of them were fishers and none of them was an office bearer. The FFP guideline requires that at least two out of three office bearers have to be fishers. Therefore the FMC was already captured by the non-fishers. The project villagers do not know the actual occupation of the FMC president and the assistant secretary, although they claimed themselves as fishers. Some of them came from the fishing community but they had given up fishing for long. They had been playing the role of brokers and worked as clients of several patrons over a longer period.

In any decision making process the FMC largely had to depend on the local fisheries officials and the implementing NGO. The FMC ignored the interest of the community. For example, the FMC banned *khora*. This was not only contested by the *khora* fishers but also by the implementing NGO. The latter, however, failed to do anything about it. But this was accepted because the SUFO insisted on it. The FMC president said he had to ban *khora* because the SUFO said it is a “fixed-engine” which is a banned fishing method according to the Fish Act of 1950.

The FMC also failed to convince the fishers that this project was undertaken for their wellbeing. The motivation drive of the implementing NGO failed to help the FMC in this pursuit. The fishers were not interested in this project at all. The FMC targeted to raise gear based license fee of Tk. 37,950 during 2002-2003 but they were only able to collect only Tk. 2,420. The fishers were reluctant to pay any fee because they did not know why they would pay and what would be the benefits. Gear fees were less before the FFP. The FMC was more active in raising gear fees rather than in implementing other activities of the project. Because of imposing license fees, a gap emerged between the FMC and the common fishers and a division amongst the fishers was clearly observed.

On the other hand the VDCs were non-existent. The only surviving community institution was the FMC. No effort was made by any actor to resurrect the VDCs and integrate them with the activities of the FMC.

## NGO

Tengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha (TMSS) started as a regional NGO but expanded fast across the country. Their Head Office is located in the district of Bogra. During the time of the study TMSS was working in 23 districts in Bangladesh. It has been working in several areas such as microfinance, education, agriculture, poultry and livestock development, human rights and so on. Ghagot is one of the four FFP sites implemented by the TMSS. In this site the TMSS deployed four staff including a team leader. The present team leader joined only a few months before our study. Previously he worked as a team leader in another FFP site of TMSS. He was yet to have a good understanding about this FFP site.

People around the PWB knew the project as “Tengamara Project”. They also knew that this water body was leased out to the TMSS. Since the project was launched the TMSS staff frequently visited the villages but failed to convince the people that this project could bring benefits to them. They also failed to help the VDCs so that they could participate in the project activities. At the time of our fieldwork there was no functional VDC in the project and the NGO was giving a blind eye to it. The NGO tried to form some fishers’ savings group to help them pay license fees. But they also failed to keep this group active. The NGO failed to uphold the spirit of community management amongst the stakeholders. They took more than two years to claim the sites for the construction of the sanctuaries.

They have not trained or helped the FMC in book-keeping, filing, and documenting. They also failed to make the objectives of the project transparent to the fishers. The fishers were confused about the nature of the project. They came to us to know what was going on in the water body and sought our advice.

In Ghagot, the power relationships were complex. The FMC was dominated by people who long gave up fishing although they continued to claim they were fishers. They were not powerful rural elites. The DOF was playing a strong role and the implementing NGO was searching for its institutional space. While they were sympathetic to the cause of the fishers but in practical terms they could not help them. They rather strengthened the rights of the non-fishers.

### **6.1.7 Jagannathpur Kole**

Jagannathpur Kole is a channel of the River Padma located in the Kumarkhali and Khoksha Upazillas of Kushtia District and Pabna Sadar Upazilla of the Pabna District. The FFP intervened here through stocking and the creation of a sanctuary. Destitute Child and Human Development Organization or DCHDO is the implementing NGO.

#### Physical Properties

The project water body (PWB) is about 6 kilometres long and 250 m to 1000 m wide. In the wet season, the PWB completely merges with the River Padma but, in the dry season, it is a separate identifiable entity, shrinking to only 200 ha.

#### Property Rights

The main fishing in the PWB was done by *ber jal* (seine net) and *ragini jal* (gill net). While the *ber jal* (8 units) were used for 8 to 9 months of the year, *ragini* fishing (24 boats) was done throughout the year. The subsistence fishers preferred cast nets; limited use was also made of other minor gears.

Jagannathpur Kole had always been controlled by powerful and influential rural elites. Property rights over the PWB never concentrated in few hands, particularly from the first few years after the independence of Bangladesh. Property rights over the Jagannathpur Kole changed hands frequently with changes in local and national politics and new social forces that accompanied these changes.

The leasing system mainly shaped the history of property rights structure in the PWB. The leaseholders followed their own mode of revenue collection but their main source of revenue was the *ber jal* owners. The leaseholders received 25% of total catch from a *ber jal* when catch was normal but this sometimes varied depending on catch. The fishers fishing with *ragini jal* had to pay toll in cash on a monthly basis. Fishing for household consumption, i.e. subsistence fishing, was free. A kind of patron-client relationship developed between the lessee and the fishers. Toll rates varied by type of payment (catch or cash), by type of fishing gear and by the amount of catch. Toll rates were flexible; it was high when catch was high and low when catch was low. We also gathered that the lessees undertook some measures to conserve fish stock by consulting with the seine net owners and agreeing on a closed season and a rotation system that was successfully enforced without much conflict.

## Livelihood Outcome

The *ber jal* owners, with the backing of local elites including the Chairpersons and Members of the Local Administration, assumed control by capturing the project institutions, particularly the FMC. They then imposed a long fishing ban to monopolise harvest by keeping *ragini jal* out of the PWB for most part of the year. The *ragini* fishers could return to regular fishing mainly at a time when the PWB merged with the River Padma and when the harvest was almost completed by the owners of *ber jal*. Even during the period when *ragini* fishers were allowed to enter the PWB, the FMC members imposed unanticipated fishing ban on them for a few days in some months. The FMC took a 40% share of the total catch from the *ber* owners and a further commission of 3% in its self-appointed capacity as *aratdar* (fish wholesaler).

The FFP in the Jagannthpur Kole increased catch that accrued disproportionately to the *ber* owners either on their own right as owners of the *ber jals* or as members of the FMC or as commission agents. Though most of the benefits of the increased catch accrued to a handful of *ber* owners, there was a 10% increase in income of the *ber* workers. The share of catch to *ragini* fishers declined.

The livelihood impact on the *ragini* fishers varied. Some were brick-kiln workers who would normally migrate out for work during the fishing ban (6 out of total of 32 *ragini* households); and they were affected least. In contrast, there were six older household heads, precluded from alternative livelihoods by their frailty, that depended entirely on *ragini* fishing; they, and their large households, suffered most. They coped by compromising on the size and quality of meals, selling livestock but they did not have to drop meals. All of them were already very poor and they were dropping meals also before the FFP. There are about 16 households of agricultural labourers who intensified their livelihoods by working more hours as agricultural labourers. Most of these *ragini* fishers had some land to fall back on in times of crisis. About half of them managed well while others could not. The severity of impact of FFP on them was, in our judgment, moderate. Some of them complained about reduction in savings, while others complained about having less food, but only sometimes. The subsistence fishers come from relatively well off class and they could withstand the shock from the fishing ban.

## FFP Institutions

The FMC took its office in September 22, 2003. This FMC was formed through an election. The size of FMC was 18. Before this FMC, an ad-hoc committee convened by the local UP Chairman was managing the PWB. This committee was formed in a very undemocratic way and shows how the rural elites were controlling the institutions behind the stage. A single example may explain the degree of influence of an UP Chairman. On July 19, 2003, in an FMC meeting where the DFO was also present, the Chairman dissolved the FMC outright with an unproven allegation that the members of the FMC were not active enough to manage the PWB. He formed an adhoc committee of FMC members where he was included as the Convener. There was no discussion on dissolving the FMC and non-performance of the members of the FMC in preceding FMC meetings. This ad-hoc committee continued to work until a new FMC was elected in September. The nephew of this Chairman was elected as the Secretary of the FMC without any contest. The Chairman also personally issued token to five subsistence fishers that permitted them to catch fish in the PWB.

Out of these 18 members, only eight were fishers by first or second occupations. The President and the Treasurer of the FMC were fishers but the Secretary was a college teacher and a local



political leader. The FMC President was a *khas* collector<sup>21</sup> of this PWB for some time. In addition there was another member of the FMC who was a previous leaseholder of the PWB. The FMC was captured by the *ber jal* owners. About half of them had *ber jals* and these people were most powerful and influential in the FMC. They were so powerful that they did not dare to violate the decisions taken or proposed by the DFO. These *ber jal* owners gave up *ber* fishing long time ago and acted more as allies of the lessees. Their *ber jals* were looked after by their trusted agents.

The FMC of this PWB did not have any idea about the FMP, what it contained and why this was formulated. They assumed that they had rights over the PWB in the sense the leaseholders previously held rights over the PWB. The FMC turned itself into an *aratdar* institution and charged a commission for this. They got a share of the catch that was almost double the share charged by the *ijaradars* during the leasing system. Not only that, the FMC charged the subsistence fishers for fishing. This was never done before the FFP. The FMC failed to transmit any sense of ownership of this project to the fishers. Instead these FMC members cum *ber jal* owners monopolised community institutions and access rights to the PWB. The FMC had good relation with the local UP Chairman and this is one of the major sources of the strength of the FMC. In addition, they also had a very good relation with police.

The FMC was very strict on enforcing the fishing ban. Even the FMC members themselves guarded the PWB to prevent poaching. At the same time they also relaxed fishing restrictions only on *ber jal* fishing. The FMC failed to collect license fee to a desired level. Thus the FMC was captured by the *ber jal* owners, local power elites, ex-lessees and supported by other FFP institutions.

## NGO

Destitute Child and Human Development Organization (DCHDO) is currently working in seven Districts of Bangladesh and its Headquarter is located in Monirampur Upazilla in the District of Jessore. Apart from the FFP, they are involved in other fisheries projects, including cage culture. For the FFP the project NGO deployed five field workers including a woman and a team leader. The team leader is commerce graduate. He has been working here since July 2001. The team leader did not have any training on fisheries or on fisheries management.

DCHDO did not have any working experience in the project area. As a small NGO, it was difficult for them to work in a locality not known to them. We realised that the NGO was always under pressure from other project institutions. One of the major responsibilities of the implementing NGO is to help the FMC in managing the project efficiently but they failed to deliver. Even they could not involve the FMC in formulating the FMP. Our impression was that the FMC did not take the NGO seriously and preferred to manage the PWB without them. The NGO was rather working as a puppet of the FMC. Collection of license fee was normally not a responsibility of the implementing NGO but in Jagannathpur Kole the DCHDO staff always chased the fishers for license fees. Even they sometimes sought assistance of the FMC members in this regard. During our field investigation we observed a discontent amongst the villagers towards the role and activities of the NGO but the NGO did not take any initiative to gain their trust. In fact the main concern for the NGO here would have been protecting the rights of the *ragini* fishers but rather to the contrary they were strengthening the rights of the *ber jal*

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<sup>21</sup> A person appointed by the local tax collector (*tehsildar*) to collect tax from the water body when the state could not lease it out.

owners. The NGO failed to play its role and shamelessly served the purpose of the *ber* owners. The community aspects of the FFP management of Jagannthpur Kole were totally missing.

Elite capture in Jagannathpur Kole was tricky and opaque. The non-fisher elite controlled the PWB from the backstage and manipulated the FFP at the local level. The agents that came to the limelight were the owners of *ber jal*. They also had representation in the FMC through other non-fishers. The implementing NGO possibly understood the power dynamics but insulated itself from the holders of power and in effect alienated them from the affected and excluded fishers such as the owners of *ragini jal*. In Jagannathpur Kole the FMC dominated the NGO and local level state institutions. It had a quasi monopoly in local level power constellations.

### 6.1.8 Boro Beel

Boro *Beel* is the name used by the FFP to refer to a massive floodplain containing 44 *jalkars* (one of which carries this same name) located in the Faridpur and Bhangura Upazillas of the District of Pabna. Of these 44 *jalkars*, only 14 were handed over to the FFP project. The FFP intervened here through stocking in the second year of the project and creation of a sanctuary in the third. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee or BRAC is the implementing NGO.

#### Physical Properties

By official estimate, the floodplain covers an area of 3,000 hectare of low floodplain, of which only 300 hectare of land is *Khas* or the property of the state. Our guess about the size of the floodplain is 25 times than that this figure.

The project *jalkars* merge into the wider floodplain for two or three months during the wet season but are otherwise distinct. The entire floodplain can be divided into four zones based on its hydrological characteristics: Zone I - permanent *beels*, Zone II - seasonal *beels*, Zone III - Rivers Ruknai and Chiknai, and Zone IV - seasonal *beels* and some channels of the Chiknai River. We looked at changes in fishing practices and fishing rights in these zones first to identify the impact of the project on the livelihoods of the fishing households.

#### Property Rights

There were a number of fishing practices and institutional arrangements that were common at the floodplain level to all the *jalkars* which influences on the management of the fishery and the impact of FFP. **First**, *bhashan* rights refer to the wet season when all the *jalkars* go under water and the floodplain becomes a single resource system. At this time the leaseholder of the *jalkars* co-operate to jointly collect tolls from the fishers. **Second**, there is a distinction amongst the fishers. The *bhagi* fishers are those who share the ultimate *de facto* leasing costs of a *jalkar*. They could be called the fisher lessees. *Joma* fishers, on the other hand, make no direct contribution to the leasing costs but obtain fishing rights in exchange of payment of toll to the *bhagi* fishers. This heterogeneity amongst the fishers points to the fact that the fishers had control in many parts of the floodplain. The *bhagi* fishers are generally the owners of major fishing gears. **Third**, excluding the rivers (i.e. the Zone III), there are also some common fishing rights and customary practices. For example, the leaseholders would allow fishing in the beginning of the dry season for a week for half of the share of the catch from the participant fishers. This is known as *beel baich*. When the catch declined, the fishers and the leaseholders negotiated a fixed toll paid in cash. This system served two purposes. Revenue collection from toll charges was high and it also helped to determine cash tolls in a competitive way since this

was practiced in all the *beels* of the floodplain and the fishers could move easily from one *jalkar* to another. **Fourth**, the leaseholders also have to allow public *polo* (trap) fishing for a day or two in the *beels* for free which is known as *polo baich*. These fishing practices, customs and local norms were more or less shielded from FFP interventions.

### Livelihood Outcome

Fishing in Zone I was, as before, mainly done by *badhai ber*, *khora* and *katha* and strongly controlled by the *bhagi* fishers. However, costs of acquiring rights increased because the *bhagi* fishers had to make various payments to the members of the FMC and others. Since, toll was fairly competitively determined, the burden of higher leasing costs was not passed on to the fishers. FFP thus resulted in a transfer of surplus from the *bhagi* fishers to the project institutions or those who controlled them. Major fishing in Zone II was done by *ber jal*; though a wide variety of other fishing gears were used in this zone. This was also not affected by the FFP. Before the project, the *jalkars* in this zone were controlled by non-fisher lessees but after sub-leasing rights went into the hands of a group of *bhagi* fishers. According to these *bhagi* fishers, this improved their income position because they now have two sources of income – from fishing and from rights to collect tolls. But note that this benefit accrued to them as an unintended outcome of FFP intervention. They took the advantage of the opportunities from the market for water bodies ushered by the FFP in this region. Major fishing in Zone III was and continued to be done by *katha*, *suti* and *khora* and a wide variety of minor gears operating in a different seasons. Despite project objectives, water bodies continued to be sub-leased by *bhagi* fishers. There was no change either in fishing practices or in fishing rights in Zone IV.

### FFP Institutions

It is important to describe the role of the state in this site. The DFO of Pabna played an important role in implementing the stocking programme in this FFP site. But to our judgment this site was not only not ideal for stocking but perhaps impossible under existing social power constellations. The timing of stocking was not appropriate. The entire floodplain was stocked rather than each individual *jalkar*. Stocking was done during the *bhashan* rights when the *ijaradars* in the past had to collide for managing the floodplain. Whatever fishes were stocked spread across the entire floodplain. The Technical team warned against stocking of species such as the grass carps that are not recommended for the FFP. They also warned the project institutions for using inappropriate tools for stocking. The DFO and the SUFO of Faridpur Thana did not take adequate measures for acquiring all 44 *jalkars* from the Ministry of Land. Almost half of the *jalkars* under the project were in total control of the underground parties and the institution of the state did not make any attempt to bring these *jalkars* under the FFP. So, not only did all the *jalkars* come under the command of the FFP, the state hardly had any control over the water bodies occupied by the underground parties. This created a simple collective action problem – those who would have contributed would not be assured of any returns from their contribution because the fishes could settle in a *jalkar* where the state had no control or in a *jalkar* that was not a part of the project.

The key problem for the DOF was to collect revenue and pay for the lease values of the water bodies that came under the management of the FFP. The SUFO played an important role in collecting this revenue. Instead of collecting the lease value separately for each *jalkar* under the project, the SUFO set a target of total lease value for all the project *jalkars* and told the FMC to collect it from whoever willing to pay most. Interestingly, the amount targeted was much higher than the actual lease value. The SUFO deposited the sub-lease money collected by the FMC in the account of Thana Fisheries Office instead in account maintained by the FMC. When asked

for a clarification, the SUFO told that the FMC was not able to manage the transactions with their own bank account. During the releasing of the fingerlings the SUFO was present but he did not take any measure against the supplier who was not following the rules related to the releasing of the fingerlings. The TNO also witnessed the releasing of the fingerlings and expressed his dissatisfaction over the event but did not take any corrective measures. During our field investigation the SUFO was on leave for 10 days. We were able to meet him for only a day and for a very short period of one hour because he said he did not have more than an hour to spare with us.<sup>22</sup>

The local DOF offices were too much concerned with stocking. There was a frantic attempt by the DFO of Pabna to stock the PWB in the first year by hook or crook. He prepared the AP for this in a day in the NGO office in the project site. While no effort was made for collecting revenue for meeting the FMC part of the stocking costs, he commented, "At first we will stock the 27 tons fingerlings of the government portion then we will think about our portion".<sup>23</sup>

A giant FMC was formed with 35 members, the third FMC in this project site. The previous FMC President was accused of corruption and was defeated in the second election. The present FMC President was elected by a large margin. This indicates the dissatisfaction of the FMC members against the activities of the former President of the FMC. The allegation against him was FMC fund appropriation, abuse of power, etc. A large number of the FMC members took a collective stand against the former FMC President. The FMC was also captured by the non-fisher influential people. None of the FMC President ever elected was a fisher. The present President of the FMC is a local influential person and a leaseholder of a *hat* (periodic market). Amongst the three office bearers, only one was a fisher violating FFP guidelines.

There was no office for the FMC; they met in the office of the PNGO. Book keeping and maintaining of records were well below acceptable standard. They did not have any document on the funds raised for the payment of the lease value and stocking related information. Even we did not find the meeting minutes for 2002 – the year stocking took place in Boro *Beel*. They did not keep the *chalan*<sup>24</sup> of the payment of lease money.

They had a bank account but they did not use it for any transaction. The funds collected for the payment of the lease value were deposited in the account of Thana Fisheries Office. It is also interesting that the FMC office bearers did not know the actual lease value of the different *jalkars* under this project. They were collecting the lease value set by the SUFO.

The major violation of FFP done by the FMC was subleasing the *jalkars*. Instead of managing by them, the FMC subleased the water bodies to others. For this the overall management system of these water bodies remained more or less the same. There was no direct interaction between the fishers and the members of the FMC. There was no participation of the community in any major decision making process. Strictly speaking, subleasing of the water bodies under the FFP by the FFP would imply that there was no single water body under the management of the FFP! It is therefore a paradox what was actually managed in Boro *Beel*.

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<sup>22</sup> The SUFO did not give enough time to Mr. Manjur Kader when he visited the PWB on 15 July, 2001. He was also away when Mr. Khaleque, Regional Manager, BRAC visited the site (report dated 1 August, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Source: Mr. Khaleque, Regional Manager, BRAC (trip report signed on 1/8/2001).

<sup>24</sup> Receipt provided by the state.

It is also interesting that the FMC did not know anything about the FMP. They did not have any idea about the rules and measures taken in the FMP. There was an allegation from the FMC that the SUFO of Faridpur Upazilla did not extend support to them. The FMC was also bankrupt in this site.

## NGO

BRAC deployed eight staff including a team leader. Others worked as field workers. The prime responsibility of an NGO in FFP is to ensure community participation and help the community organisations to implement the project activities successfully. But the NGO failed to show any evidence which showed that this project was managed by the community. The implementing NGO was not able to keep the VDCs active. They also failed to make the FMC work properly and effectively. Even they could not ensure that the FMC meetings were held regularly. The documentation process of the NGO was very poor. We had to encounter a lot of hassles for collecting the information on the lease value of the *jalkars* incorporated under the FFP in this site. Even the NGO did not have any document on the actual money collected for the payment of the lease value. The NGO team leader had been working in this site since the inception of the project but he did not have any clear idea about the FMP. He did not even assist the FMC in preparing the FMP. According to him, the SUFO of Faridpur Thana played the leading role in preparing the FMP.

During the study the NGO staff played a “hide and seek” strategy. Every time we asked them for any information, they were very much reluctant to provide them. Always they tried to evade us by referring to their preoccupation with “other involvements”. They sometimes became annoyed with us when we asked for basic information required for conducting our work.

Moreover, the NGO did not take any initiative to train the members of the FMC to perform the financial transactions and basic book keeping skills. This, in effect, justified SUFO’s decision to keep the collected funds in his account with the rationale that the FMC was not capable of maintaining bank account. But such an important decision should have been taken and recorded in an FMC meeting. On top of this there was hardly any rapport between the SUFO, FMC and the NGO.<sup>25</sup>

In our judgement geographical, hydrological, socio-economic and institutional factors all made the success of FFP highly improbable. The size of the PWB, the number of seasonally distinct water bodies within it, and the number of project villages was too large. The fishing environment was highly complex, fishing practices were highly varied and there were a number of deep rooted norms and customs governing fishing behaviour. As a result, management of FFP activities by the state, NGO and other community institutions with the resources made available was difficult to the least, if not impossible. Most of the *jalkars* in the floodplain remained outside FFP (some under the control of a banned underground party). Yet stocking was allowed to go ahead at a point in the hydrological cycle when these were still joined to the project *jalkars* in a single resource system. This was, in short, a highly inappropriate site for the CBFM model adopted by FFP, raising questions about both project design and site selection. The persistence of all the institutions involved in continuing with this suggests either a lack of understanding of the pre-conditions for effective CBFM or a lack of openness in partnership arrangements.

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<sup>25</sup> Tapash Kumar Roy, FCS, Rajshahi, in his trip report (25 May 2003) observed that "The team (i. e. the implementing NGO) has started estimating monthly production and forwarding a copy to DFO. However, they are not providing any copy to SUFO and sharing the data with fishers". We are, however, not aware of collection of any such data by the implementing NGO.

### 6.1.9 Bangali River

The Bangali River is a freshwater river located in the Sariakandi Upazilla of the District of Bogra. The section of this River selected for the FFP is about 7.5 kilometre long, 200 metre wide, and 5-13 metre deep. The FFP intervened here through creation of a sanctuary. TMSS (Tengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha) is the implementing NGO.

#### Physical Properties

The PWB never dries up completely but there is no aquatic vegetation in the river. In the dry season, its area is reduced to 130 hectares with more water remaining in the six *dohos* (deeper, scour holes). *Katha* fishing in the *dohos* is the main fishing practice and accounts for as much as 60% of total catch. *Ber* catch account for about 20% of total catch. A large number of other fishing gears also fish in the PWB. In one of the *dohos* a permanent sanctuary was established, while the others had been classified as “temporary sanctuaries”. This meant they were fished once a year.

#### Property Rights

Before it was brought under the FFP, the PWB went through two *de jure* property rights regimes: the leasing system and the open access system. During the leasing system, the entire PWB was leased out as five independent *jalkars* to three administrative Union-based Fishers’ co-operatives who in turn sub-leased them to influential rural elites. These rural elites installed *katha* in the *dohos*, with the harvesting being undertaken by professional fishers on a catch sharing basis. These fishers were highly professional and used a set of fishing gears locally known as *gulli jal*. The sub-leaseholders also collected tolls from the professional fishers in the form of a share of the catch. During the open access system, these sub-lessees were able to retain firm control over the *dohos* with an un-stated understanding with the Fisher’ co-operatives and state institutions associated with the PWB. For example, the number of *kathas* never exceeded the number of *dohos* – none, other than the former sub-lessees, could install *kathas* in the PWB.

#### Livelihood Outcome

All indications were that the effect of the project on both fishing practices and the level and timing of effort was marginal and that there was no detectable impact on the productivity of the fishery. The fishing practices of the fishers in the PWB had not changed since the FFP intervention. Techniques of *katha* fishing remained the same, as did fishing with other gears. The sanctuary, which was placed between two *kathas* in the same *doho*, was poorly managed and underinvested. As reported by the fishers, catches from the fishing gears used in the PWB remained unaffected by FFP interventions. Neither the amount nor the species composition of the fishes coming from the PWB to the local fish market changed. Total catch from the *dohos* varied from year to year and there was no evidence to show that catch from the *dohos* systematically increased by the project intervention. Since there was little detectable change in production and no substantive change in the type or terms of access for the project’s target group, the professional fishers, the impact of the FFP on their livelihoods was minimal.

## FFP Institutions

Seven out of 11 project villages had virtually no fishers. So there was hardly any representation of the fishers in the VDCs constituted from these villages. On the other hand four project villages had no association with the PWB in terms of involvement in *katha* fishing. As a result the non-fishers from these villages got opportunity to get involved in FFP institutions. Most of the non-fishers from other project villages were the sub-leaseholders and the fisher members of the FMC were no more than silent observers of the development of FFP institutions.

Giving all villages representation on the FMC, guaranteed that representatives from “non-fishing” villages would have an automatic majority. A new elite group, with strong political links either with the ruling party or with the opposition, took advantage of this. These active new elites (henceforth referred to as ANEs) attended FMC meetings and participated in the management of the PWB. They were largely the supporters of the ruling BNP government. Initially, the FMC went for an all out effort to maximise surplus extraction from the PWB. They helped to arrange *katha* fishing that used to be mediated by the Fishers’ co-operatives. Strong resolutions were made regarding the fees charged on spots allocated for *katha* fishing and a fourth of *katha* harvest went to the coffers of the FMC. They also collected license fees for one year. Most of the ANEs invested in *kathas*, mainly in co-operation with those sub-lessees who failed to establish a position within the project institutions. Thus the sub-leaseholders of the past had to share the cake with the ANEs.

The fishers came mainly from the MSS and played a passive role in project institutions. The FFP could not uphold the interest of these fishers and failed to empower them. In some villages the FFP institutions kept some fishers outside project institutions. Thus the client base of the FFP here was small, powerless, dominated by rural elites and non-fisher lessees and the NGO entirely failed to aware them of the purpose and objectives of the FFP. The FMC was composed of four professional fishers with no say in the decision making process, five lessees, and three ANEs. The President of the FMC was a local political leader of present ruling party, BNP. He was a contractor and a local leader of *Thana Jubo Dal* (youth front of the ruling BNP). Amongst the three office bearers, two were non-fishers. The Secretary was a supporter of the main opposition party, the Awami League. The Treasurer was a professional fisher. In a private conversation the Hindu fisher Treasurer conceded that he had no intention to stay in the FMC but the FMC leaders were forcing him to remain in the FMC.

Since the same lessees were involved in the FFP institutions either as members of the VDCs or as members of the FMC, they were able to maintain their rights over the PWB. But at the same time the new elites appeared in the scene and took part in project activities. This generated a new set of property rights not contemplated by the designers of the FFP in this site.

Thus it was clear that the FMC appeared as a separate institution that was not only playing the role of quasi-defunct institutions but also playing a new a role of a lessee. The members of the FMC were now chipping in whatever benefits generated by the fishing activities in the project activities. They were charging for the spots, taking a fourth of the catch, monitoring *katha* fishing, collecting license fees and they were also involved in providing credit to others.

This was the major source of conflict and power dynamics of the FFP institutions, particularly of the FMC. This did not so far resulted in any major tension between the sub-leaseholders and the ANEs. They had the common interest of inheriting the FFP institutions, particularly the FMC, because at the end of the project it would remain the only formal institutional vehicle for establishing rights over the project water body.

The DOF and the PNGO have helped the FMC to tighten its grip over the PWB through the project institutions. What was happening to this FFP site was known to DOF and the implementing NGO but we found no evidence that they had made a serious attempt to change the course of these events or help the poor fishers to gain even marginally from FFP interventions.

### NGO

TMSS deployed four staff including a team leader. The NGO failed to show any evidence of this project being managed by the community. The implementing NGO failed to keep the VDCs active. They spent all effort to keep the FMC functional. They ensured that the FMC meetings were held regularly. The documentation of the NGO is of average standard. The NGO team leader had been working in this site since the inception of the project. He did not have any clear idea about the FMP. According to him, the DFO of Bogra played the leading role in the preparation of the FMP of 2001. But in monthly reports and travel completion plans, discussions about the FMP with FMC have been referred to. The NGO also misreported on the actual number of fishers in the FMC.

The NGO did not take any initiative to train the members of the FMC to perform and record financial transactions and basic book keeping skills. The implementing NGO in effect acted as an agent of the FMC. A review of the minutes of the meetings of the FMC revealed that not a single decision was taken in the interest of the fishers. They did not even inform the fishers about their rights and the purpose of the project. They endorsed almost all the activities of the FMC.

The FFP in Bangali River was unsuccessful. The community institutions could not be developed along the lines contemplated by the FFP. They were captured by the non-fishers. The interesting but complex aspect of the institutional change brought about by the FFP intervention was the emergence of a new class of rural political elites and the symbiosis that was crystallising between them and the old guards – i.e. the sub-leaseholders. The sub-lessees got a formal institution to establish their rights but they could not control it completely. The state institutions and the implementing NGO collaborated with the FMC and never helped the fishers to make any effort to reclaim their lost rights.

#### **6.1.10 Beel Gawha**

*Beel* Gawha is a *beel* located in the Gobratola Union of the Sadar Upazilla of the District of Chapai Nawabganj. The FFP intervened here through restoring the fish habitat, stocking and creating a sanctuary. BRAC is the implementing NGO

#### Physical Properties

Historically, the PWB was well connected to the Mahananda River through several canals and other *beels*. The FCDI project of 1986 changed the hydrology of the project area and its environs. Fishing practices also changed. The effectiveness of the fishing gear is now determined less by nature and more by the amount of stocking. The number of species of fish declined sharply – only a small proportion of catch is composed of naturally recruited fish.



## Property Rights

Up to 1992, the leaseholders or the *Mahajans* leased in the PWB from the office of the ADC (Revenue) with a tacit understanding with the leaders of various Fishers' Cooperatives. The main fishing gears used in the water body was *ber jal* and *fash jal* and their owners were required to pay tolls to the *Mahajan*. The subsistence fishers normally fished during the falling floodwater for free. All stocks relied on natural recruitment.

The FCDI project opened up the opportunity for aquaculture in the *beels*. This started with a lag in the PWB but brought several changes to property rights. The Fishers' cooperatives were ignored and the leaseholders did not require their mask. Open bidding pushed up the auction value of the PWB. The Fishers' cooperatives that could not be totally ignored previously are now also priced out and have become functionally defunct. The fishers were virtually turned to fish workers.

The major contractual change took place in the institution of *pala bodol* that allowed the Mahajans to keep a tight control of both labour costs and the distribution of fishing opportunities among their fisher clients. Under these rules the *Mahajan* decided on the key variables: which fishers can fish, the amount and species of catch, the size of fish caught, duration of fishing time, and the share of catch the fishers will get from the harvest. The *Mahajan* thus effectively determined fisher's income from each days fishing. The *pala bodol* also involved a rotation of fishing teams, which determined how often each fisher was able to fish and how many fishers are involved. In practice, most of these opportunities went to fishers of the largest fishing village, irrespective of who was controlling the water body. But the individuals involved in harvesting did differ, as different Mahajans had different clients; so, exclusion and inclusion was common.

## Livelihood Outcome

Six fishers got access to the hot spots where they fished with traps. More fishers were involved in fish harvesting and the share of the catch they could retain increased to some extent. Before FFP two sets of four teams worked on alternate days; after FFP, three sets of six teams worked every third day. So, more fishers could fish after FFP as more gears participated in the harvest.<sup>26</sup> For those previously unable to fish this was an unequivocal gain. Those who had previously fished the decline in the regularity of employment was compensated, at least in part, in a number of ways from a general improvement in the conditions of fishing: the increased catch (due to stocking), an increased catch share (up from 10% to 15%), better prices and a greater allowance of fish for home consumption. For those that did lose out, losses were marginal and they coped well by fishing elsewhere (particularly the Mahananda) or following a variety of other livelihood activities.

## FFP Institutions

There was some scepticism at DOF about the suitability of this site for FFP, as they knew well that the poor fishers would be unable to pay the lease value and that elites would capture project institutions. It is not clear why they went ahead. The LGED also did not follow a consultative process for designing and implementing the habitat restoration. The link between the *beel* and the river was not re-opened, so there were no gains in natural recruitment. The pond excavated was small and the dirt was deposited inside the *beel*, reducing space and

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<sup>26</sup> This is what is known as income-sharing through work-spreading (Platteau and Baland 1989).

affecting fish movement. But most fishers were of the opinion that it had helped to increase catch of stocked species, as it stretched the harvesting period through the dry season.

The FMC here was captured by the local elites. Previous leaseholders and the UP chairman had established a firm grip over the PWB through the institution of the FMC. The first FMC was formed with eight members and most of them were non-fishers. Even the FMC office bearers were also non-fishers. At one stage the need was felt to increase fishers' participation in the FMC as per the project guidelines but none of the non-fisher FMC members wanted to resign. Then four new fishers were included in the FMC to give the appearance of a participatory institution and the size of the FMC became 12. An ex-fisher was selected as the FMC President but all the project activities are controlled by the FMC Secretary, the present UP Chairman. According to the FMC meeting resolution it was decided that the FMC president would get Tk. 1,000 per month as honorarium but in practice he was getting an honorarium of Tk. 1,500 per month.

All FMC members were not active. Almost all of the active members were non-fishers and previous leaseholders. The FMC Treasurer was supposed to maintain all the financial records of the project. But in practice all these record-keeping were done by another person outside of the FMC who was a close crony of the FMC Secretary. This person was a partner of the FMC Secretary when he leased in the PWB few years ago. This person also maintained all financial records at that time. The Treasurer was often given new clothing from FMC account to keep him happy and mute.

About half of the members of the FMC made the large chunk of investment in the PWB. They were all non-fishers and owners of large amount of land. There were five "genuine fishers" and out of them 4 were inactive and 3 were members of the MSS. They were taken in the FMC to make the FMC look like it was owned by the fishers. A fourth of the members were previous leaseholders.

In the FMC, the Secretary always played the key role. He had influence over all the FMC members. The Secretary of FMC informed to us that the fishers were not able to manage the huge cost of this project. For which it was not possible for them to manage the PWB. It was found that the Secretary of FMC paid a large amount of money to bear the leasing and stocking cost in the name of the fishers. Some other influential FMC members also paid the money in the name of fishers. These persons are previous leaseholders and also stocked fish in the PWB in the past. After the FFP, the FMC also stocked almost 4.5 tons of fingerlings of carps in the PWB. This stocking was on top of the amount approved by the FFP. The decision of this additional stocking was taken in an FMC meeting. It has to be recalled that at the initial stage of the project the central dilemma faced by DOF was their concern about the ability of the fishers to pay for the huge leasing and stocking costs. It turned out that they were not only able to pay for that, in addition they paid for stocking of 4.5 tons of fingerlings that was not required or approved by the FFP! The FMC was supposed to play the key role in formulating the FMP. But in practice the FMP was formulated mainly by the NGO in consultation with the top non-fisher leaders of the FMC.

## NGO

At the beginning of the project an NGO called Assistance for Development Programme (ADP) was selected for implementing the project. Later ADP did not continue the project for unknown reasons. Then BRAC took the responsibility as the implementing NGO. Before starting their operation, BRAC had a meeting with the fishers. In this meeting the fishers expressed their

willingness to manage the PWB. They also informed that they would be able to pay for the lease value as well as other costs of operating the project. Later BRAC deployed two staff including a team leader and started work from January 2002. BRAC did not have any office at this FFP site. They implemented their activities from their office located in the District town of Chapai Nawabganj about 17 km away from the PWB. BRAC had been working in the project area for the last 10 to 12 years. They were operating microfinance programme in the project and non-project villages. Among the so called 84 contributing fishers, 53 were involved with MFIs and among them 23 were members of BRAC.

According to the staff of the implementing NGO, though the fishers informed that they would be able to manage leasing and other costs but they believed that the fishers would not be able to do so because they were very poor. It was not possible for them to manage such a huge amount of money for implementing the project. The NGO also realised that the few non-fisher rural elites would arrange for the funds required for managing the PWB. It was almost impossible for them to work only with the fishers bypassing the local elites. They did not go for conflict with these elites for the sake of the project.

The NGO confessed that they played the major role in formulating the FMP. According to them they set out the rules in the FMP and shared them with the fishers who accepted them without any disagreement. The NGO also stated that most of the fishers were illiterate and not able to formulate a plan of operation such as an FMP.

The NGO confessed that they were yet to develop leadership among the fishers. It was found that the fishers of the project villages always remained under the control of influential leaseholders. Access rights were strictly controlled by the leaseholders. The fishers were turned to dependent fish workers. In this scenario it was really difficult to develop leadership among the fishers to manage the PWB independently.

On the surface of it the NGO developed a good documentation process but the NGO dilly-dallied in providing the project documents we required. It was found that NGO kept several sets of same documents and in many cases one contradicted the other. For example, they kept the several sets of harvest information but this information was not the same in all the harvest registers. These documents were created to hide facts rather than expose and collate them. They also provided us with a register book of a list of the names of the contributors but it was concocted. No receipts were issued by the Managers of the project for the alleged contribution of the genuine fishers listed in this register book.

This is a typical situation where at the grassroots level the members of the NGO had to continue doing a project that they privately thought of not worth doing. But since they depend on this project, they had to help it to survive.

Nevertheless, the FFP in *Bee/ Gawha* has been a partial success. The managers of the project were able to increase fish production, include more fishers in fish harvesting, increased the share of the catch going to the fishers and the amount of fish taken by the fishers for home consumption and provided rights of access of some occasional fishers to the hotspots while restoration of the fish habitat appears to have helped to increase production from stocking. Thus the project fared well on both efficiency and distribution grounds. But these have been achieved not by community-based fisheries management. In fact the community has been socially disabled and by-passed by asymmetric power relations and the rights of management were concentrated in the hands of few wealthy non-fisher rural elites. The success of the project is the success of this oligarchy of the rural elites not of the community. These rural elites made

huge investment in aquaculture that was in effect subsidised by state in the form of fingerling contribution in successive years of the project. However, as the history of property rights of the PWB suggests, the rights of the fishers were lost long before aquaculture flourished in this area when the fishers were gradually turned to fish workers. The FFP could not resurrect these lost rights and status of the fishers but marginally compensated that by gifts provided by the non-fisher rural elites to the fishers. The distributional gains mentioned above form the elements of this gift made possible by FFP subsidy and these gifts are less likely to outlive the life span of the project.

#### **6.1.11 Elite Capture in other FFP Sites**

The experience of the FFP in other FFP sites is not well documented at this stage. However, Begum (2001) presents about six cases of elite capture but without detail. In some FFP sites the *katha* owners have been controlling the PWBs. “The *katha* operators are socially powerful and have connections not only at the local administrative level but also at higher places including Members of the Parliament, Ministers and the Speaker of the National Assembly. These people establish *kathas* at the most productive points of the water bodies. They do not catch fish themselves they hire fishers for this purpose either as wage labour or on a share basis.” (Begum 2001, p. 15). In Chengur *khal*, “the local influentials have arbitrarily divided the water body among themselves” (Begum 2001, p. 15). In Barnai River, the rural elites made all attempts to stop its handover to the project. “The NGO staffs have been asked by these people (i.e. the rural elites) to stay away from Masidpur village. They have also threatened the NGO staffs of physical violence if they make attempt to carry out community mobilisation in Masidpur village. The Executive Director of the partner NGO herself had discussions with the leaders of the Cooperative Society to come to some reasonable compromise but it has not produced the expected outcome. These people have been lobbying with the District Administration and one Minister to stop Project intervention in their area. This water body has been handed over to DOF for Project intervention and it is difficult to make any concrete statement at this stage about the Project’s future here” (Begum 2001, p. 16). In Katarmar *khal* the non-fishers were coercing the fishers for not taking part in the FFP besides lobbying with the District Administration and the Speaker of National Assembly. In Borobila *beel*, some leaders of the fishers’ co-operatives are controlling the PWB.

## **6.2 MORE SUCCESSFUL SITES**

### **6.2.1 Ichamati River**

The Ichamati River is located between Santhia and Bera Upazillas of the District of Pabna. The FFP intervened here through stocking and creating a sanctuary. It is a large project site. There are 60 project villages and the project water body (PWB) is 42 kilometres long. Grameen Matshya Foundation (GMF) is the implementing NGO.

#### Physical Properties

The PWB was a natural river until, in 1992, it was turned into an irrigation canal within an FCDI project. This separated it from the higher order river system and from its connection to the floodplains; water levels in the river are now determined by the demand for irrigation in the neighbouring croplands. Fish species diversity has declined and many of fishing gears and techniques previously used – such as *katha* – are no longer appropriate. The fishers diversified their livelihoods and started to depend more on alternative fishing grounds.

## Property Rights

Historically, the entire river was divided into seven parts and these were leased out to six Fishers' cooperatives. The physical boundaries of these parts are still retained and referred to by the respective number of the parts (i.e. from Part I through Part VII). In the four years before FFP, a state sponsored Poverty Alleviation Project (PAP) was implemented here. It created fishers' groups that stocked six of these parts with the objective of alleviating poverty amongst the poor landless fishers living in adjacent villages. Beneficiaries were mainly Hindus, who had been members of the Fishers' cooperatives, though some Muslim fishers were also included. Stocking involved the release of fingerlings worth of Tk. 100,000 every year from 1996 to 2000. A closed season immediately after stocking followed.

FFP replicated many of the elements of the PAP management system (group formation, fund-raising, stocking, closed season and so on), though there were changes in the names of the organisations – territorial use rights were now with Fisheries Sub-committees (FSCs); and there was a further increase in the number of Muslim fishers gaining access to the PWB. About ten new FSCs emerged and the number of fishing gears that operated in the PWB increased by nine. Entry to the FSCs was strictly restricted and therefore the FFP generated benefits were confined to the members of the FSCs. Stocking was done in the entire water body but during harvesting the FSCs set fences in their respective parts. This helped the FSCs to internalise the benefits of their territorial rights.

Three types of rights in the PWB characterised the FFP in this site. **First**, there were parts of the PWB where the Hindu fishers had to accommodate new FSC members (Parts I, II and V). Accommodation involved sharing of the territory not institutionally merging with the new entrants. **Second**, there were parts where territorial rights were held by the same type of agents and not shared with the new entrants (Parts III and IV). **Third**, parts characterised by private aquaculture (Parts VI and VII). We assessed livelihoods outcome in Part V, III and VII.

## Livelihood Outcome

Those who previously held rights over Part V (Nondonpur and Pargopalpur villages) had to accommodate those who acquired this right through their involvement in the FFP (Vato Khan Mahmudpur and Dhopadoho villages). The Nondonpur and Pargopalpur FSCs experienced reduction in catch that was roughly compensated by catch from other water bodies to which they had access. The loss in fishing time and catch from the PWB was negligible. None had to drop meals or to take new livelihoods. They mostly had to compromise slightly on the quality of food consumed and spending less in social and religious festivals. However, they were getting worried about the future of their rights over the PWB.

Those who newly acquired rights (Dhopadoho and Vato Khan Mahmudpur) had no experience in fishing with *ber jal* and gained much from their involvement in the project. The members of the FSC belong to the poorer section of the village population. They fished in this part of the water body with minor fishing gears by paying toll to the Hindu fishers. They no longer had to pay toll and gained from stocking. Welfare gains to these households range from accumulation of assets to improving the quality of food consumed.

The Hindu fishers of Boro Sonatola were able to retain their territorial rights in Part V. They, like many other professional Hindu fishers, changed their livelihoods pattern substantially since the river was turned virtually to an irrigation canal. As a coping strategy they fished elsewhere and undertook non-fishing activities. Some of them had taken up fish trading full time while others

had taken it part time on a seasonal basis. They gained mainly from the fish harvesting months which coincided with peak fishing time in the floodplains. The gains from FFP was clear, they reduced fishing time in the floodplains and participated in fish harvesting in the PWB. They reported that their income gain was negligible and did not significantly change their livelihoods.

Private aquaculture was undertaken by some Muslim fishers in Part VII during the PAP. Six FSCs could establish their rights over this part of the PWB but they refrained from (private) stocking in the first two years of the FFP. After the second harvesting, unlike other years in the past, they did not take out their fences. Rather they privately stocked exotic species of fish in their respective sections. They outperformed the FFP stocking and made big returns from their investment. They were not rich households – most of them were poor households who borrowed heavily for financing investment in their part of the PWB.

### FFP Institutions

There were 27 FSCs in this site. The FSCs followed a two-tier administration system; a general body and an executive committee. The general body is comprised of all the members and the executive committee is elected by the members of the general body. The meetings of FSCs were held regularly. FSC is the entry point for a fisher to derive benefits from the project. Without being a member of a FSC a fisher can not get any benefit from the project. So the FSC worked as a closed club.

Each FSC opened a bank account. They also developed a good documentation system under direct guidance from the GMF staff. In many aspects the FSCs enjoyed enough freedom in the decision making process. After deciding on the starting date of harvesting in the FMC meeting, the FSCs then decided how long they would harvest from the PWB independent of any interference from the FMC. The respective FSCs for Part VI and Part VII decided to culture fish in their part of the PWB at their own cost.

The institutional relationship of the FMC and the FSCs were sometimes formal and sometimes informal. Total cost of managing the project was equally divided between each part of the PWB and then the members of the FSCs in each part equally shared the cost associated with the management of their part of the PWB. All FMC meeting was attended by the representatives of all the participating FSCs. These meetings decided on estimating the total management costs, date of fingerling stocking, harvesting and so on. The respective representatives of the FSCs passed this information back to the other members of the FSCs in their regular meetings. During stocking in one part of the PWB representatives from other parts also witnessed release of the fingerlings. This is not done during harvesting but NGO members recorded catch on a regular basis. The FSCs arranged for guarding their respective parts without any support from the FMC. This resulted in a hierarchical development of a community based fisheries management system. Some decisions were taken in the centre while others were taken at the local level in the meetings of the FSCs. There was minimum interference from the central institution of the FMC.

The number of members of the FMC is 28. Amongst them 18 are Muslims and the rest are Hindus. All the office bearers are Hindus. The FMC performed well in monitoring releasing of the fingerlings in the PWB. They took part in weighing and releasing of the fingerlings. The main source of revenue of the FMC is the contribution made by respective FSCs.

## NGO

GMF is a member of the Grameen family dedicated to the development of the fisheries sector in Bangladesh. GMF deployed a team leader and seven field workers including a woman. The team leader and three other field workers had been working here since the beginning of the project. We found the GMF workers sincere and performed their duties well. Three of them had prior experience and training in fisheries. After the FFP, with the support from the SUFO, the GMF formed groups with more or less the same people although there were some new groups with new faces. But the signboard had been changed to FSC. In addition the GMF also formed the Fisheries Management Committee (FMC). The GMF was successful in arranging regular meetings of the FSCs as well as of the FMC. The field workers also played an important role in teaching the FSC members about the basics of book keeping and documentation. They also had close interactions with the FSC members. The GMF deserves credit for their detailed documentation and hard work done in this FFP site. Almost all the project related documents have been filed properly. The GMF played a vital role in formulating and drafting the FMP. The FMC and FSCs are almost ignorant about the rules and measures taken in the FMP. The FMP of this FFP site is well-structured and rules are clearly defined. A genuine effort was made to follow the guidelines of the FFP for the preparation of the FMP. Though the FMP proposed of many restrictions and conditions, in practice, only the fishing ban was effectively enforced.

But it is a site from where the GMF did not have to start from scratch. Some of the fisher groups now participating in the FFP institutions also participated in previous institutional arrangements under the PAP. At the beginning of the project the GMF tried to form the FSCs but encountered several problems. Initially, the fishers lacked trust on the GMF. They thought the GMF was going to form fisher groups, raise money and then run away with it. In this situation the GMF sought assistance from the SUFO. Later the SUFO arranged for a meeting with the leaders of the fishers and briefed them about the objectives of the FFP and eventually convinced them about the benefits of the project.

The FFP in the Ichamoti River was able to increase catch through stocking, helped more fishers to benefit from the gains from increased catch and impacts on some Hindu fishers were negative but insignificant. Overall, the impact of FFP interventions on the livelihoods of the fishers have been positive and the project could accommodate more fishers and more fishing gears in the PWB.

From an institutional perspective community based fisheries management is difficult in a very large resource system involving many stake holders. These hurdles were overcome by the FFP in this site for many reasons. **First**, the FFP institutions did not have to start from scratch – a project managed by the DOF was already in operation before the FFP was implemented here. The Poverty Alleviation Project or PAP formed small groups of fishers, raised funds, stocked the water body, followed a closed season and so on. These activities were still followed in the FFP. The participants in the FFP were exposed to these types of interventions and no NGO was involved. The PAP is more close to co-management than the FFP because the latter included an additional actor – the NGOs. **Second**, the main source of conflict in this PWB has been between the Hindu and Muslim fishers but this was not a big conflict. The Hindu fishers dominated the rights structure over the PWB and the PAP first attacked the foundation of this structure by involving Muslim fishers in many fishers groups. The FFP followed suit and involved even more Muslim fishers in community management. The water body was not captured by the rural elites but by the Fishers' cooperatives dominated by the Hindu fishers. Since they come from the minority group and their cooperatives started to witness reduction in membership as many Hindu fishers started to cross the borders, it was not possible for the Hindu fishers to

resist this change. The Hindu fishers, it must be noted, were not excluded but their fishing space had to be reduced to make room for the new fishers. **Third**, the dependence of the fishers, Muslim and Hindu, was not high. The Muslim fishers had a wide range of livelihoods to pursue whereas the Hindu fishers had many other alternative water bodies to fish. It is precisely for this reason the Hindu fishers were able to cope with the loss in fishing income from the PWB.

What has to be remembered is that the PWB was captured legally by the Hindu fishers. It was not captured by the non-fisher rural elites. Therefore, the power base was already weak and started to crumble when the PWB was turned to a closed canal. This power base was attacked by the state – in this case the SUFO. The NGO did not undertake any action for breaking the power base. Once this power base was shaken, it was relatively easy to include more Muslim fishers by increasing fingerling stocking. Increase in stocking also helped to reduce conflict and accommodate more fishers. Three things stand out from the experience of the Ichamoti River. **First**, community institutions were already present. The rush involved in other PWBs was not necessary in this site. **Second**, the PNGO co-operated very well with the SUFO even in circumstances when the PNGO felt it difficult to collaborate at times. **Third**, while in other FFP sites, the VDCs were disabled and the institutional focus was on the FMC, here the FSCs were supported to the extent they could play an independent role as an institution.

### 6.2.2 Tangaon River

The Tangaon River is located in the Pirganj Upazilla of the district of Thakurgaon, in the north of Bangladesh. The FFP intervened here through creation of three sanctuaries. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee or BRAC is the implementing NGO.

#### Physical Properties

The characteristics of this river are close to those of a hilly river. The length of the PWB is about 4.5 km. The physiographic characteristics of this area are different from the main riverine part of the country that has crisscrossed by many rivers, their branches and tributaries. Because of this geographical characteristics this area has very little flood plain depressions.

#### Property Rights

The fishing practice in the PWB was quite simple and the fishers few. More than 90% of the fishers were *fika* or cast net fishers. Before the FFP most of the fishing was done in the *kathas*. *Katha* fishing was restricted inside the deeper parts of the PWB during the leasing system (1985-1995). There are three such deeper parts or *dohos* in the PWB. The PMSS or the Pirganj Matshyajibi Shamobay Shomity (a fishers' co-operative society from Pirganj) leased in the PWB and sub-leased the *dohos* to a group of households who came from the same lineage group. They were the influential households having large tracts of land – the rural elites. They had a strong control over the *dohos* until the water body was brought under the FFP. During the leasing period the PMSS controlled effort outside of the *dohos* and the professional member fishers had access to the non-*doho* part of the PWB. The professional fishers, however, never had access to the main *dohos*. These *dohos* were always under the control of the local elites. It was in these *dohos* the FFP created the sanctuaries. The open access system (1996-2000) initiated a regime of anarchy. While the *dohos* were still under the control of the same lineage group, outside it a large number of *kathas* were placed mainly for subsistence fishing. Though economic returns remained positive, catches in the *kathas* declined, with those inside the *dohos* being substantially reduced when compared with the period of the leasing system. The



professional fishers could then fish only in a smaller area in the dry season because of the large number of *kathas* that were placed here and there all across the PWB.

It is under these circumstances the water body came under the FFP. By turning the *dohos* into sanctuaries and removing the *kathas* elsewhere, the project boosted both biomass and biodiversity and reclaimed the space outside the *dohos* for use by professional fishers, with corresponding increases in their catch. The fishers were issued cards that embodied their rights to fish in the PWB and participation in the FFP.

### Livelihood Outcome

The fishers were very poor before the FFP and suffered frequently from food deficits. This soon turned out as a thing of the past. Higher catch led to higher income. They crossed the poverty hurdle in only two years and from a very precarious poverty situation.

### FFP Institutions

The state played an important role in this site. The attitude of DOF was more like they owned the project. For example, the license card issued to the fishers bears name and signature only of the UFO. Normally, such card should be issued by the FMC who had the management rights or at least the cards should be co-signed by the President or the Secretary of the FMC. It is also alleged that the UFO influenced the tendering process and gave the contract to a person personally known to him. He discarded the schedule of the tender submitted by the FMC who quoted a lower price. He persuaded the FMC president to sign the receipt of the sanctuary materials when the contractor actually supplied almost nothing for the sanctuary. No punitive measures were taken against the contractor so far. There was also an allegation that the UFO took some fishes after fishing was done in the sanctuary in Nowhata *doho*.

But at the same time the UFO played some positive roles in implementing the activities of the project. He took part in many FMC meetings, encouraged the FMC members to sustainably and equitably manage the PWB, and made some suggestions and recommendations towards achieving these objectives. The UFO also helped to receive the attention of the civil and police administrations for removing the *kathas* from the PWB and prevent illegal fishing. The DFO and UFO played an important role in resolving the conflict with the PMSS. The DFO of Thakurgaon also visited the project sites on some occasions. In 2001 PMSS was against this project. The DFO, UFO and the NGO team leader explained the PMSS about the actual objectives of the FFP and assured them of their rights and benefits. The local civil and police administrations also worked in favour of this project. The TNO sent police force to the PWB when their services were requested. They extended help in implementing the project activities. The Deputy Commissioner of Thakurgaon also visited the project site in 2002.

This FFP site experienced several reshuffles in the composition of the FMC. The existing FMC at the time of the survey had only three fishers out of a total of eight members. Only one office bearer was a fisher. Therefore the FMC had already been dominated by the non-fishers. But the FMC was not working against the interest of the fishers. However, there were some allegations of corruption against them when fishing was done in one of the sanctuaries. Barring these allegations, the FMC was reasonably transparent in other financial transactions. They undertook their book-keeping and filing of records quite efficiently. In the FMC meetings the FMC cashier reported the financial transactions regularly. He did the same when the FMC met with the card holders.

The FMC in Tangaon River has been a listening FMC. It started with an FMP where rules and regulations were kept fuzzy. But slowly through a consultative process rules and regulations were clearly defined and enforced. The fishers played a large part in this process. The role of the VDCs was disabled by this time.

One of the key **non-project** institutions had been the PMSS. Recall that the PMSS had formal leasing rights over the PWB from 1985 to 1995. They lost these rights when the open access system was in force in the PWB since 1996. During the leasing system the PMSS subleased out two *dohos* to the *katha* setters. This helped them to make some profit because they did not have the social power to establish their control over the *dohos*. On the other hand it was during this period they could serve the interest of the professional fishers. Since *kathas* were set only inside the *dohos*, space-based gear conflicts were resolved and fishing effort was effectively restricted. Thus it served both clients of the PMSS well – the *katha* setters and the professional fishers. With the open access system the PMSS lost the right to sub-lease and the *katha* owners had free access to the *dohos*. Neither the PMSS nor the *katha* owners could control *katha* fishing outside the *dohos*. This affected the professional fishers most because their effective fishing area declined substantially as the PWB became almost full with *kathas*. Thus the PMSS and the professional fishers were slowly losing their control over fishing in the PWB. The rights of those who controlled the *dohos* were also attenuated because they could not stop others from setting *kathas* outside of the *dohos*.

Under these circumstances the FFP came as a shock to the PMSS. **First**, they thought that the PWB was leased out to BRAC. **Second**, they thought it was only the fishers who lived inside the project villages would be allowed to fish in the PWB. The project villages only had a few unorganised fishers and they played a very passive role. But a large number of fishers from outside the project area used to fish in this PWB. They could be easily identified. They came on bi-cycles for fishing. They gathered around one spot where they kept their cycles together and then split away for fishing to gather back again in the cycle stand to start their return journey towards home. Most of these fishers were the members of PMSS. For example, only the card holders were allowed to fish in the PWB under the FFP and most of the card holders were the members of the PMSS. What is interesting here is that the professional fishers inside the project villages never contested their entry to the PWB. In fact about 25% of professional fishers from the project villages were also members of the PMSS.

The FFP started in Tangaon River with a strong resistance from the outside fishers organised under the banner of the PMSS. They organised a movement against the FFP arguing that the Government had leased this water body to BRAC illegally. This movement of the fishers was also backed by local left leaning political parties. The FMC and NGO workers convinced them of the actual objectives of this project. The leader of PMSS went to the Deputy Commissioner of Thakurgaon and tried to lease in the water body again. But the Deputy Commissioner told them that this part of the river was already been handed over to the DOF for implementing the FFP.

Thus the FFP in this site had to face challenges from two sides; the *katha*-setters who controlled the *dohos* and the professional fishers who were feared of losing their residual fishing rights in the PWB. The two claimants were tactfully handled mainly by the team leader appointed by the implementing NGO. When the *katha*-setters realised that they lost control over the *dohos* they started to merge with the project institutions. The VDCs were slowly captured by the non-fisher *katha* owners. The NGO tactfully handled this situation by gradually disabling the VDCs. This they did by minimising the institutional influence of the VDCs. Later the NGO concentrated on organising the fishers and ensured that both the fishers from inside the project area and outside it would be able to catch fish in the PWB provided they paid for the license fee. As a

consequence of this strategy the VDCs became weaker but the cardholder fishers stronger. The card holders became a strong group who could be hardly ignored by other agents. The PMSS and the project institutions had to support them. The NGO and the FMC successfully involved the fishers by engaging them in different project activities such as guarding, maintenance of the sanctuary and so on. The card holders disagreed with the idea of guarding the PWB by hired guards; instead they took full responsibility for this. They made a list of fishers who volunteered to guard the PWB. A schedule for guarding, especially in the sanctuaries, was prepared. In the night they took responsibility for guarding by rotation. In the daytime, when they were involved in regular fishing, they peer-monitored unauthorised fishing. The FMC created the sanctuary by themselves with the assistance of the card holders. The card holders also took part in removing some *kathas* from the PWB. The fishers achieved a sense of ownership of the project. The card holder fishers were very concerned about the project. They organised regular meeting amongst themselves and they also took part in the decision making process of the FMC. Interestingly the cardholders did not have any representation in the FMCs or the defunct VDCs.

## NGO

BRAC appointed only two staff including the team leader in this site. BRAC played a very crucial role behind the success of the FFP in the Tangaon River. BRAC had been operating savings and credit programs in this area since 1996. This helped BRAC to develop a strong client base in the project villages. This was very helpful in implementing the FFP in this site. In particular, the present team leader very efficiently dealt with most of the problems that were cropping up during the course of the FFP. The team leader earlier worked as an Area Manager in Rangpur for four years. He received several trainings on Operational Management, CBFM, Development Management, Financial Management, etc. Before he joined in April, 2002, two team leaders were changed in this FFP site because of their alleged inefficiency. The team leader was very hard working. We saw him putting tree branches along with the fishers in the sanctuary during one of our unscheduled visits. He could hardly be distinguished from the fishers. He was successful in increasing the number of card holder fishers, particularly those who lived outside the project villages. Apart from raising revenue for the project, this accommodated the highly organised professional fishers who once held rights over the PWB and made all attempt to defend these rights when contested. These are the fishers who initially thought they lost fishing rights to BRAC. He taught the fishers about different advocacy tools so that the fishers could raise their voice if the project encountered any threat. The Team Leader also developed a good relationship with the community. In a very short period he developed a good network with the members of the police and civil administration, local elites, mastans, etc. The NGO team leader also tried to include the real fishers in the FMC and to some extent he was successful. He was still trying to include more fishers in the FMC. The NGO field worker had been working in this project since its inception. He was also a hard worker. According to the fisher he also took part in guarding the PWB to prevent illegal fishing. The NGO staff played a very important role in making it clear to the community that the project was designed to benefit them. People around the project village know about the project and how it has been contributing to increasing fish production and improving the livelihoods of the poor fishers.

So, how were these positive outcomes achieved in the Tangaon River? Some of the conditions of the PWB were favourable for a switch to community management: there were relatively few fishers; the river and the fishing practices were not complex; and the decline in production brought about by the open access period provided some impetus to look for alternatives to the status quo. But, the success of the FFP was largely due to the flexible way the project institutions deployed both persuasion and the legitimate force of the state to handle conflicts and conflicting claims coming from the *katha* setters.

The greatest threat came from the socially influential *katha* setters inside the *dohos*, who were the main losers. They were kept away directly and indirectly by the project institutions. The civil and police administration along with DOF and the implementing NGO removed the *kathas*.

In resisting this, the project showed considerable flexibility in its willingness to take advantage of the existence of a large number of fishers from outside the project villages who were already organised within a co-operative (PMSS) and accustomed to fishing within the PWB. As noted above, to gain fishing access for its members, PMSS had, during the leasing period (up till 1995), been allied with the same influential *katha* owning lineages; but new circumstances encouraged new allegiances. As FFP involved no lease fee and greatly improved opportunities for fishers, PMSS was willing to provide a support base for the project and took an active role in the management of the PWB, compensating for the absence of the VDCs.

The FMC and the implementing NGO consulted with the members of the PMSS on issues related to the management of the PWB almost on a day to day basis. The sanctuaries were created and maintained by the fishers with almost no financial contribution from the project.

*Has the FFP in the PWB been a success?* The FFP in Tangaon River has been a success without doubt. The FFP has helped the professional fishers in many ways. Before the FFP their catch and income was low and most of them suffered from chronic food deficits. After the FFP, their catch and income increased and they no longer suffered from food insecurity. The success happened for many reasons. **First**, the sanctuaries were established and well-maintained. They preserved the brood fish and ensured the growth of the fish stock. **Second**, the *kathas* that were scattered all around the PWB were successfully removed. This resulted in an expansion of fishing space for the professional fishers, particularly in the dry season. **Third**, the licensing system restricted entry of fishers. The fishers who paid for the license fees were issued identity cards. These cards to the fishers embodied their rights to fish in the PWB and were held with high esteem. **Fourth**, the cardholders were peer-monitoring each other and made sure that the subsistence fishers did not fish for long or sold their catch. **Fifth**, the ban was imposed and enforced only for three months and during a period when catch was normally low. The fishers also had access to other parts of the river outside the PWB. The consequences of fishing ban were well compensated by the increase in catch brought about by the FFP interventions. None had to take alternative livelihoods during the fishing ban. This shows that coping capabilities of the affected fishers are determined by the extent of project success. **Sixth**, there has been an increase in fish biodiversity. Many species that were only available in the past reappeared. The quality of the fish also increased. This was confirmed from several sources.

Now why the FFP in the PWB has been a success? Again there are many reasons. **First**, for a long time (1985-1995) the fishers had residual rights over the PWB. They had to give up fishing rights in the *dohos* to the local elites for money but they retained fishing rights in the remaining parts of the project water body. Fishing effort was controlled inside the *dohos* by the sub-leaseholders and outside the *dohos* by the PMSS. The professional fishers therefore had no problem with space in the dry season. **Second**, the *dohos* in effect worked as sanctuaries. The Kodomtola *doho* had a deepest part that was never fished. On the other hand the deepest part of the Nowhata *doho* was harvested only once a year. The professional fishers in the PWB were thus aware of the benefits of restricted fishing and sanctuaries. They needed less persuasion for appreciating the beneficial effects of sanctuaries. **Third**, the open access period that prevailed before the water body was brought under the FFP was characterised by anarchy where the rights of the professional fishers were seriously curtailed. *Kathas* were set everywhere and dry season fishing zone for the professional fishers dwindled. They therefore welcomed the FFP.

**Fourth**, the NGO, DOF and local administration played a very positive role. The performance of the team leader of the PNGO has been outstanding. It was not an easy place to work and there were conflicting claims and capture attempts. The NGO could always come up with a settlement that was not harmful for the project. **Fifth**, the PMSS also played a positive role and they were taken seriously by the project institutions. The approved FMP was customised to local conditions and a set of rules were developed that in effect acted as an alternative FMP. This was developed from a consultative process involving the project institutions and the professional fishers. **Sixth**, the intervention was not costly. Despite the corruption, the fishers could maintain the sanctuaries by themselves with active support from the NGO and other project institutions. **Seventh**, dependence on the water body was low. The project villages had only 24 professional fishers. The number of outside fishers was about 31. They were homogeneous; most of them were *fika* fishers. The insider fishers never questioned the entry of the outsider fishers in the PWB. The insider-outsider conflict typically observed in fishing was absent here. **Eighth**, the FFP was very flexible. Normally, FFP rule does not allow membership to fishers outside the project village. This FFP site was based more on the outside fishers. **Ninth**, the non-fisher *katha* settlers in the *dohos* were not very strong in terms of their influence. In fact, they lost control outside the *doho* during the open access period. Rather than using force to reclaim their rights, they were planning to go to the formal courts to settle their case.

In many ways this PWB is unique. Limited dependence on the PWB, a small and homogenous fisher group using mainly cast nets, a relatively weak social power base of those who controlled the *dohos* is the factors that went in favour of the FFP. But the fact remains that the FFP could take advantage of this and successfully implemented the project in the Tangaon River.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The case studies presented here show clearly that the NGOs failed in most cases to empower the fishers. In many ways the case studies portrayed a stereotyped picture of the rural elites taking control over the PWB and marginalising the fishers. The NGOs stayed away from the act of helping the fishers. It was a risk not worth taking for the implementing NGOs. In sites where they were apparently successful, the NGOs benefited more from pre-existing institutions that were already functioning well rather than from their effort to develop new institutions or modifying those that were malfunctioning. The case studies clearly show that all size does not fit all. Property rights structure varies, so are the actors who contest to establish their rights over PWBs that are hydrologically diverse.

The severity and depth of power relationships vary from one water body to another. So does the collective ability of the fishers to establish their rights over water bodies. This collective ability is given by history (institutional capital) and changing (institutional change over time) – an outcome of past and present government policy and socioeconomic-political development at local and national levels. It is not true that all water bodies are captured by the rural elites or all fishers' co-operatives are used as masks by the non-fishers and they are powerless. Even when the water bodies are managed by the fishers, project outcome could be different. For example, the Ghagot River as well as the Ichamoti River was controlled by fisher lessees but project outcomes were opposite. In Ghagot the fisher lessees were more concerned with rent extraction whereas the power base of the fisher lessees in Ichamoti River was gradually shaken by the state. The FFP had potential in Ghagot from disciplining the fisher lessees but the PNGO failed to take this opportunity. On the other hand the PMSS in the Tangaon River had strong residual rights over a large part of the PWB but gave up rights over the hot spots that went under the control of the non-fisher elites. They were unhappy with the massive construction of small

kathas in the PWB that followed with the demise of the leasing system. This squeezed their fishing space and they were looking for a way out. The FFP opened up this space. Thus the project failed to understand and use these aspects of initial conditions that would have helped them design strategies on a case by case basis. It is not true that this information is not available to the state – it is bad governance that prevented the state from sharing this information and take appropriate actions. The main stocking sites such as Dasherhat Chara and Beel Gawha are classic examples where large project investments were made knowing that the fishers were already priced out/marginalised and therefore can not benefit from the project. They could neither pay for the lease nor afford stocking costs. Similarly, it was known to the managers of the project that the Boro Beel was inappropriate for project intervention but intervention did take place without any benefit accruing to the fishers.

The key feature here is the role played by the primary institutions. To withstand capture attempts, the project in effect abandoned the VDCs and focussed on the FMCs; most of which were already heavily intruded by the power elites. Under these circumstances the project had to debug the primary institutions which in turn would have debugged the FMC. In Ichamoti River a highly decentralised and nested institutional structure turned out to be very effective. In Tangaon River the card holders who came from outside the project villages and led by the fishers co-operative played the key role. The PMSS was formally kept outside the project domain but informally included as a key player working in favour of the fishers. In Ichamoti River the state weakened the aging fishers' co-operatives and created new groups of fishers who played a key role. The apparent losers were well compensated because of larger stocking under the FFP. Though they were not happy with sharing territorial rights with the new institutions of Muslim fishers but found it not damaging enough to their immediate fishing interest. The fact remains that they were deriving resource rents in the pasts. The system of group-based management of fisheries was well grounded in the Ichamoti River before FFP intervention and hence the PNGO had to co-operate with the SUFO to exploit this institutional setup. The elements of community institutions were not only there but also functioning before the FFP. The FFP only had to build on past achievement of the PAP rather than confronting or disabling them.

While the failure cases showed how power continued to sustain despite project interventions, the success cases showed the important factors that are crucial for community based fisheries management. **First**, a strong state is required to challenge local power structure. Platteau (2003a, p. 1697) makes it explicit that "in order to curb the obnoxious influence of vested interests of local power-holders, a strong and effective central government must exist that is determined to confront the clientelism of rural areas in an environment rife with rent-seeking opportunities" (P. 1697). While the Bangladesh state at the local level could be weaker and its performance in the successful sites could be mixed but it was more or less conducive to the implementation of the project. A small change in attitude of the state in the failed sites would have made a big difference in community management. **Second**, the intensity and severity of power can affect the outcome of the project. In Ichamoti River, the power was in the hands of actual Hindu fishers although they were often led by what we are referring to as fisher lessees. It was relatively easy for a weak state to handle weak power base there and that too without the help of any NGO. In Tangaon River, the non-fisher sub-lessees who set *kathas* in the main *dohos* failed to stop others from setting *kathas* in other part of the water body during the open access period (i.e. immediately before the FFP intervention). This was impossible in Bangali River where the lessees continued to limit *katha* under the same property rights regime, i.e., the open access system. This also happened in Padma Narisha Unjanjala too where the rural elites had a strong control over *katha* fishing. Rather than using force, the non-fisher elite in Tangaon River were resorting to formal legal institutions to reclaim their illegal rights. **Third**, the fishers were organised by state in the Ichamati River and by themselves in the Tangaon River well

before the FFP. The PAP organised fishers in to groups spread across many villages, the PWB was stocked; the fishers groups harvested the fish and benefited from the project. In the Tangaon River, the PMSS was able to retain its members and reward them with residual space for fishing in the PWB while the *kathas* were turned in to sanctuaries. Like the state, the fishers had to confront relatively weak power structures. The Muslim fishers therefore acquired their territorial rights in Ichamoti River without much contest from the existing group of Hindu fishers. On the other hand the PMSS could stand against the non-fisher *katha* settlers when they were supported by an enabling state (at the local level) and an active NGO team-leader. While the NGO and state took more than two years to remove the *kathas* from the PWB in Ghagot River, it took less effort for these agents to do the same in the Tangaon River. **Fourth**, while in failed water bodies the only surviving community institution was the FMC, in the two successful sites the primary institutions were alive and played a very active role. In Tangaon River, the PMSS and the card-holders acted as primary project institutions in lieu of the VDCs that were scrapped when it was realised by the project managers that they were infested by the rural elites. In the Ichamati River, the FSCs were vibrant and took control over their own institution while liaising with the FMC when required. The NGOs did not have to spend much time to develop these community institutions.

This raises serious question about viability of establishing community-based institutions for fisheries management in Bangladesh. Can a weak state with massive poverty wait long for communities to develop and take care of their livelihoods through increasing catch from the fishing grounds? In some sites, the project could not even take off due to elite resistance while in others outcomes were miserable. In these sites the NGOs seriously failed to empower the fishers. Only in a couple of studied water bodies community institutions could flourish and at the time of the study were able to generate and internalise benefits from FFP interventions. Thus the time required to develop effective community institutions could be too long and many states may not have the leeway for waiting so long to see the benefits accruing to the poor. The experience of the FFP in Bangladesh aptly showed the social, political and time dimension of pursuing a strategy of community based fisheries management. The state, donors and development practitioners must now rethink about the feasibility of community-based fisheries management in Bangladesh.

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