

**THE SUNDARBAN RESERVE FOREST IN BANGLADESH –  
AN URGENT CALL TO ENSURE THE FULL AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF  
INDIGENOUS AND TRADITIONAL RESOURCE USERS IN ITS  
GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT**

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to provide a glimpse of the process undertaken by indigenous peoples and local communities to document and reflect on their traditional knowledge and customary uses relevant to the management of the Sundarban Reserve Forest and to assess the extent to which the Convention on Bio-Diversity (CBD) Programme of Work (PoW) on Protected Areas (PAs) has been implemented by the government of Bangladesh in the Sundarban. The Sundarban was chosen because it is the single largest mangrove ecosystem in the world and three nationally declared PAs are situated within it.

## **The Sundarban: Indigenous and Local Communities, Biodiversity and Protected Areas**

Of the 22 existing PAs in Bangladesh, this paper will address the governance status of 3 PAs in the Sundarban Mangrove Forest. This will also provide an insight of the present situation concerning the implementation status of Articles 8(j) and 10(c) of the CBD.

The Sundarban, designated as a World Heritage site is composed of three wildlife sanctuaries: Sundarban East Wildlife Sanctuary, Sundarban South Wildlife Sanctuary and Sundarban West Wildlife Sanctuary. The total area of the World Heritage Site is 1400 sq. km. out of which 910 sq. km. is land and 490 sq. km. is water (Banglapedia, 2005). The three sanctuaries are intersected by a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats and small islands of salt tolerant mangrove forest. The area has been recognized globally for its importance as a reservoir of biodiversity. This mangrove supports a unique assemblage of flora and fauna, including charismatic mega fauna like the Royal Bengal Tiger, Estuarine Crocodile and the Ganges River Dolphin. The Sundri tree, after which the Sundarban is named, is an endemic species of this forest ([www.bforest.gov.bd/conservation.php](http://www.bforest.gov.bd/conservation.php)).

A large number of communities live in the proximity of the forest (to its North and East), an area called Sundarban Impact Zone (SIZ). Most of these communities rely largely on the resources of the Sundarban for their livelihood. An estimated population of 3.5 million people (including the traditional resource users) inhabits the SIZ. Local people are dependent on the forest and waterways for such necessities as firewood, timber for boats, poles for house-posts and rafters, *Golpata* leaf for roofing, grass such as *Mele* grass (*Cyperus javanicus*), *ulu* grass (*Imperata cylindrical*), *nal khagra* (*eriochloea procera*) for matting, reeds for fencing and fish mostly for their own consumption, and medicinal plants for herbal treatment. The traditional resource users of the Sundarban are the indigenous Munda community and local Bawali (wood cutters), Mouali (honey collectors), Golpata (nypah palm) collectors and Jele (fisherman) communities (Kabir and Hossain, 2006).

## **Efforts by the traditional resource users to implement the Programme of Work on Protected Areas**

Representatives of these traditional resources users, with the support of Nijera Kori, Onneshan Unnayan, Humanity Watch and Forest Peoples Programme carried out a study in 2006-2007 to document their traditional knowledge, customary uses and cultural practices relevant to conservation and sustainable use in the Sundarban protected areas, thereby contributing to the implementation of Activity 3.2.2 of the PoW. The study demonstrated that the traditional resource users possess distinct customary ways to sustainably manage the resources of the Sundarban, but these practices (as well as the Sundarban) are now under threat by a number of factors.

Apart from the case study, at a national workshop organized in May 2007, they also called upon the government to take action to reform the governance system of the Sundarban by recognizing the role played by customary users (as traditional knowledge and practices are currently ignored and marginalized) and by calling for their full and effective participation in the management and policy-making of this important wetland.

## **Action by the Government to implement the PoW**

The paper will contain a table evaluating to what extent the most prominent provisions of the PoW in relation to participation, governance, equity and benefit sharing have been implemented in the Sundarban and what actions needs to be taken urgently. Table 01 shows the present state of government activities regarding the implementation of PoW.

One of the main recommendations from this analysis is the urgent need to fully involve indigenous and local communities in policy and practice concerning the sustainable use and conservation of the Sundarban.

## **Conclusion**

Representatives of indigenous and traditional resources users of the Sundarban have taken action to implement some of the activities recommended in the PoW on PA. They are now calling on the relevant government agencies to do their part to implement the PoW, especially to recognize the rights of indigenous and local communities and to ensure their full and effective participation in management and policy-making of the Sundarban. One way to do this is to implement the PoW on PA in conjunction with the implementation of Article 8(j) and Related Provisions, particularly Article 10(c).

## **REFERENCES**

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Targets to be achieved	Status of Implementation	Urgency	Responsible authority
Effective mechanisms for identifying and preventing, and/or mitigating the negative impacts of key threats to protected areas are in place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No remarkable initiative has been taken by the state to prevent and mitigate the negative impacts of key threat to protected areas</li> <li>Government accepts the 'ecosystem approach' but practically it is totally absent</li> </ul>	Very high	Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF)
Establish mechanisms for the equitable sharing of both costs and benefits arising from the establishment and management of protected areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) and Access and Benefit sharing (ABS) mechanism are yet to be developed. The Government has drafted 'The protection of plant variety and farmers' rights' since 1998. Several times it had been amended, but it has not come into force.</li> </ul>	Very High	MoEF
Full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities, in full respect of their rights and recognition of their responsibilities, consistent with national law and applicable international obligations, and the participation of relevant stakeholders, in the management of existing, and the establishment and management of new, protected areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No effective mechanism has been developed for stakeholders to participate in decision-making. Even to prepare the draft of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) -2004, indigenous and local communities are not effectively consulted</li> </ul>	Very High	Forest Department
Frameworks for monitoring, evaluating and reporting protected areas management effectiveness at sites, national and regional systems, and transboundary protected area levels adopted and implemented by Parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PAs are not managed through effective management criteria. They are all exclusively controlled by the Forest Department, which is often blamed for massive corruption and harassment of local communities</li> <li>No data is available on Transboundary protected areas (TBPAs)</li> </ul>	Very High	Department of Environment
Public awareness, understanding and appreciation of the importance and benefits of protected areas are significantly increased	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public awareness are significantly increasing, NGOs are playing a vital role to develop awareness</li> </ul>	High	MoEF, Ministry of Local Govt., Livestock and fisheries etc.

**Table 01: Present status of government initiatives regarding PAs**