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The Imposition of Participation? The Case of Participatory Water Management in Coastal Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: Community-based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) has been promoted as part of the development discourse on sustainable natural resources management since the mid-1980s. It has influenced recent water policy in Bangladesh through the Guidelines for Participatory Water Management (GPWM) where community-based organisations are to participate in the management of water resources. This paper reviews the extent of success of such participatory water management. It does so by first discussing the changing discourses of participation in Bangladesh's water policy from social mobilisation to decentralised CBNRM. Second, Bangladesh is used as a case study to draw attention to how the creation of separate water management organisations has been unable to promote inclusive participation. It argues that the current form of decentralisation through a CBNRM framework has not resulted in its stated aims of equitable, efficient, and sustainable management of natural resources; rather it has duplicated existing local government institutions. Finally, it questions the current investments into community-based organisations and recommends that the role of local government in water management be formally recognised.

KEYWORDS: Community-based natural resources management, participatory water management, local government institutions, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Community-based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) is based on a simple and attractive assumption that communities, defined by their distinct and integrated social structure and common interests, can manage their natural resources in an efficient, equitable, and sustainable way (Blaikie, 2006). CBNRM has been promoted by most major International Financial Institutions (IFIs) since the mid-1980s as part of the development discourse on sustainable natural resources management (Blaikie, 2006; Mansuri and Rao, 2003). Decentralisation is defined in this paper as any political act in which a central government formally cedes powers to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Ribot et al., 2006). It has been argued that any form of decentralisation should increase efficiency, equity, and democracy "by linking the costs and benefits of local public services more closely" (World Bank, 1988: 154). In the mid-1990s governments, international development agencies and large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began to decentralise by transferring power to a wide range of local institutions, including private bodies,

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...institutions, activities and local NGOs (Blair et al., 2005). CBNRM involves decentralisation of power to community-based organisations where the underlying rationale is that decentralisation to communities will increase accountability, transparency and accountability to local people (Fisher and Korten, 1995). The promotion of CBNRM thus coincided with a variety of underlying discourses regarding decentralisation (Blair and Mukherji, 2005). This discursive shift was a result of a broader discourse that had emerged since the late 1980s, the latter discourses referring to 'governance' being understood in a broader sense and 'community-based organisations' (CBOs) being seen as a form of decentralisation that had been neglected in favour of other alternative models of power, where CBNRM discourses have increasingly been recognised and become more prominent in policy-making circles.

...Despite such criticism, Bangladesh has seen significant realisation of major IFIs and donors in promoting CBNRM and decentralised water management in its water policy reforms. The National Water Policy (NWP, 1995) and the Guidelines for Participatory Water Management (GPWM, 2005) placed local-level responsibility for water management from state government agencies to community-based organisations (CBOs) and local government organisations (LGOs), with limited involvement of local government institutions. To date, thousands of participatory water management groups in Bangladesh's coastal infrastructure (sanitation, irrigation, flood regulation, coastal forest) have been established and engaged across the country (Blair and Mukherji, 2005; Buisson, 2006; Fisher, 2005; Ribot et al., 2006). In the WMA in coastal Bangladesh, this involves the creation of a local government institution (Governing Body, 2005). The paper will therefore critically assess participatory water policy by using a critical and comparative lens to evaluate the 'community-based' water governance of participation. By analysing the local government participation in public service provision in coastal Bangladesh, the authors will evaluate the effectiveness of decentralisation of water management through CBNRM and its ability to address coastal water challenges, while highlighting how a participatory local government institution, a local

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The Imposition of Participation: the case of PWM in Coastal Bangladesh
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A process by which the local stakeholders are directly and actively involved in identification, planning, design, implementation, operation & maintenance and evaluation of a water management project.

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The wiki version of the Lessons Learnt Report of the Blue Gold program, documents the experiences of a technical assistance (TA) team working in a development project implemented by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) over an eight+ year period from March 2013 to December 2021. The wiki lessons learnt report (LLR) is intended to complement the BWDB and DAE project completion reports (PCRs), with the aim of recording lessons learnt for use in the design and implementation of future interventions in the coastal zone.

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