

Toggle menu
Blue Gold Program Wiki

Navigation

- [Main page](#)
- [Recent changes](#)
- [Random page](#)
- [Help about MediaWiki](#)

Tools

- [What links here](#)
- [Related changes](#)
- [Special pages](#)
- [Permanent link](#)
- [Page information](#)

Personal tools

- [Log in](#)

personal-extra

Toggle search

Search

Random page

Views

- [View](#)
- [View source](#)
- [History](#)
- [PDF Export](#)

Actions

File:Research 2014 Imposition of Participation dewan buisson mukherji.pdf

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- [File](#)
- [File history](#)

- [File usage](#)



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,

Go to page

...stitutions, 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, responsiveness and sustainability 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 discourse also saw a shift in the institutional role of water management organisations, where community-based organisations were created to take over day-to-day operations and maintenance (CBNM) of public irrigation systems. However, Blair (2005) argues that such theories based on collective action do not question the role that the community of resource users (individuals and organisations) in an irrigated system of social organisation. There is a tension between the framework to support historically determined and culturally specific systems of resource, where rights and obligations to resource management are water social and political (Blair, 2005; Blair 2005). In fact, central studies and institutions in Asia and Africa have found that CBNRM policy has failed to address the central issue of efficiency, equity, decentralisation (Blair, 2005; Mukherji and Gopalakrishnan, 2005; Mukherji et al., 2005; Mansuri and Rao, 2003; Ribot, 2005; Subramanian, 2005). In a review of community-based water user associations in Asia, it was found that, at best, results were mixed, with many failures. Integration with only a few successful cases (Blair et al., 2005). Studies in South Asia indicate CBNRM for Asia is to be viewed as a reworking of a long-standing community-based of natural justice and power relations (Blair and Mansuri, 2005; Land et al., 2005; Ribot, 2005; Cooke and Kahler, 2005; Blair, 2005; Kahler, 2005; Subramanian, 2005). Subramanian (2005), writing on irrigator water management in coastal Bangladesh, points out that CBNRM schemes that are constructed as homogeneous entities represent complex realities where access and control over water resources vary by location, individual and historical systems of differentiation. It indicates water management schemes or the decentralisation of resources can be understood as an attempt to create power relations that have been determined previously and in a range of socially-determined configurations (Blair, 2005).

Despite such criticism, Bangladesh has seen significant investment of major IFIs and donors in promoting CBNRM and decentralised water management in its water policy reforms. The National Water Policy (Mansuri, 1995) and the Guidelines for Participatory Water Management (GPWM, 2005) placed users' responsibilities for water management from state responsibility to community-based organisations (CBOs) and community-based water management organisations (CBWMOs), with limited involvement of local government institutions. To date, thousands of participatory water management groups in Bangladesh's coastal infrastructure (demonstrations, pilot irrigation, canal) have been established to address water management in rural coastal areas (including the present research) (Mansuri et al., 2005; Ribot, 2005; Subramanian, 2005; Fahn, 2005; Fahn, 2005). In the WBA in coastal Bangladesh this centres on projects with the role of local government institutions (Subramanian, 2005). The paper will therefore critically assess participatory water policy by using qualitative and quantitative data collected to assess to what extent 'community' user groups of participation. By analysing the data, this paper contributes to policy water participation in practice. It seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of decentralisation of water management through CBNRM and its ability to address coastal water challenges, while negotiating the role of government institutions, a key

[next page →](#)

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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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Date/Time	Thumbnail	Dimensions	User	Comment
current 19:40, 16 December 2020		1,240 × 1,754, 25 pages (921 KB)	Saad.chowdhury (talk contribs)	

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Namespaces

- [File](#)
- [Discussion](#)

Variants

[Categories:](#)

- [Dewan et al](#)
- [Paper](#)
- [Documents in English](#)
- [PWM](#)
- [Gender](#)

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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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