

Ways of getting things done

Finding the right institutions for floodplain management in Bangladesh



The floodplains of Bangladesh provide crucial livelihood opportunities for millions of poor people. But their ever-changing character and the diverse range of stakeholders that use them makes their equitable and sustainable management especially difficult. International donors, governments and NGOs have all tried to ensure wise use of floodplain resources and despite their efforts results are at best mixed. So what lessons can be learned from this for the future? Research suggests that supporting existing institutions can be key to ensuring sustainable benefits for the poor. A more adaptive approach is needed to find institutional arrangements that work.

In Bangladesh...

Floodplains in Bangladesh conjure up dramatic images of catastrophic flooding. Yet they are home to some 80 percent of the country's population. More than half of rural households are landless and subsist below the poverty threshold. Their livelihoods are a complex mix of farming and fishing, which rely on the seasonal interplay between land and water. Food production has broadly kept pace with population growth and this is largely due to investment in small-scale irrigation for rice cropping and in flood control and drainage which reduces inundation in the monsoon. But such improvements have been at the expense of fishing, which is becoming increasingly marginal, and the floodplain ecosystem which is a rich source of biodiversity, aquatic flora, birds and fish.



Involving stakeholders

Many recent floodplain development initiatives have emphasised the importance of involving local stakeholders in the management of natural resources. These strive for 'collective action', 'participation', 'equity', and 'pro-poor' outcomes. They assume that stakeholder involvement in designing rules and activities for resource management will increase participants' personal stake in achieving appropriate and hence sustainable outcomes. This approach to management would then be self-sustaining. Positive outcomes would lead to continued participation, increased acceptance and a continuing cycle of pro-poor integrated floodplain management (IFM).

Donors, government and NGOs have all subscribed in various ways to this approach to bring about sustainable floodplain management and pro-poor outcomes. Although there have been some successes many have failed on both accounts. Many projects have experienced difficulties in ensuring benefits for poor people and sustaining positive changes, particularly when external support finishes.

Learning from this experience

In order to learn from these experiences an extensive review was undertaken of project impacts on the poor, the performance of rural management organisations (RMOs), and the role of participation involving the entire range of floodplain stakeholders – from target beneficiaries and other local stakeholders to project field staff and project managers based in Dhaka.

This work has started the debate about what constitutes the 'right institutions' for IFM

Particularly useful was a method of process documentation that gathered the opinions and understanding of a range of local people in confidence.

Special emphasis was given to well-established community management practices or 'local initiatives' that operate without outside support.

Formal and informal institutions

Normally, floodplain management institutions are taken to mean national and sector-specific bodies such as the Department of Fisheries or the Ministry of Water Resources. All sectors – fisheries, water, and environment – have attempted to include local representation by building new institutions such as RMOs in at least some of their projects. But their efforts are not well coordinated. Each sector has its own policy objectives, approaches to management, and RMO model. Also their purpose in promoting participation and the role of RMOs is different (see table below).

In addition to these formal interventions another mode of floodplain management exists. Informal 'local initiatives' were found to have very different objectives and rather than operating through the new structures, they used existing and informal institutions to implement floodplain management.

Two important informal institutions seem to shape this type of management. The *salish* a local dispute resolution system where elders have authority to make decisions about local conflicts, land use or access issues – and *samaj* – a type of 'brotherhood' (linked with the Mosque) that emphasises social duty and helps to make mosque committees and their decisions well-supported and locally legitimate. These interact with the formal institutions to a point where it

becomes difficult to discuss the function of one without the other. For instance, the performance of local government (formal) is better understood by also considering the role of the mosque or local political allegiances (informal).

From these observations a more practical definition of institutions emerged – meaning '*regular patterns of behaviour*' or simply '*ways of getting things done*'. This definition brings together the formal institutions, such as visible organisations and committees, and the informal ones that are less tangible such as local power relations and social or religious norms.

Recurring issues

The research showed that all types of floodplain management intervention had their own characteristic sets of achievements as well as problems. Crucially, there were recurring issues that should be addressed in future:

- *Local support for new management and RMOs is limited by bad past experiences or low perceived relevance.* The purpose of new initiatives must be made clear early on. The interaction between primary stakeholders and supporting agencies often declines too quickly, sometimes because participation is only considered important at the beginning of projects. Local champions, such as individuals, informal institutions (mosque committees, the *salish*) or formal groups such as RMOs or local government institutions, are needed to take management forward. Existing institutions are more likely to outlive new RMOs and will be better placed to access the support of other secondary stakeholders and widen legitimacy.

Features	Sector		
	Fisheries	Water	Environment
Participation	Group formation and light support	Group formation and planning	Continuous, advisory
Project Purpose	Increased fish production	Flood management for increased farm production	Habitat management
Structures (RMOs)	Fixed groups	Fixed, hierarchical groups	Resource management and alternative income generation groups

- *All IFM stakeholders recognise that 'resource capture' by influential people is a real problem.* New opportunities that arise from IFM interventions are most readily accessed by the wealthy who can afford to invest time and money. Initiatives should recognise the need to assure fair access for the poor and to track social impacts.
- *There are real difficulties gaining widespread local support and enthusiasm for IFM interventions.* Some IFM interventions have actually tended to alienate some groups, polarise livelihoods groups and create conflict. A livelihoods-based approach with real effort for holism may avoid this problem and help identify 'win-win' options. Tools such as Participatory Action Plan Development (PAPD) could be applied prior to any changes in floodplain management. Good facilitation skills are an asset to enabling effective communication between stakeholders and coordination of efforts.
- *Constraints to scaling-up effective floodplain management occur at national, regional and local levels.* Project managers believe that local-level issues such as 'resource capture', lack of support, and new conflict are the key bottle-necks. Managers identified a need for trained local field staff with the ability to understand local social and political issues who would be equipped with the tools to record significant events and react to them.

The challenge ahead

This research has shown that the performance of IFM projects depends on much more than the design of their user committees or other project structures. Rather they are shaped by the informal institutional setting that surrounds them. There is evidence of a real demand for more adaptive approaches to IFM that incorporate proven institutional mechanisms for pro-poor participation. This work has started the debate about what constitutes the 'right institutions' for IFM. The need now is to 'keep on keeping-on' – communication, promotional work, continued strengthening of evidence of institutions that work – so that sustainable institutions for pro-poor management of Bangladesh's vital floodplain resources are realised.

R8195 Integrated floodplain management – institutional environments and participatory methods

The guidelines and outputs developed by this project have since been further developed as a policy brief by R8495 Promotion of sustainable institutions for integrated floodplain management: integrated floodplain management: barriers and challenges.

For more details of participatory action plan development (PAPD) see R8223 A learning and communications programme for Participatory Action Plan Development methodology.



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