

The Institutional context of Integrated Floodplain Management in Bangladesh

Overview

Policy and practice relating to the management of Bangladesh's floodplains is influenced by numerous institutions that overlap, reinforce or sometimes contradict one another. Normally, the "*institutions*" relevant to floodplain management are taken to mean those national and sector-specific bodies, such as the Department of Fisheries or the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), with distinct floodplain remits and targets.

However, the scenario is further complicated by another layer of institutions that are not represented as structures or organisations. These "*informal institutions*" influence natural resource management and many other aspects of everyday rural life, simultaneously. A multitude of informal institutions function in rural Bangladesh (the *samaj*, the *salish* courts, the dowry system etc.) and many of these directly or indirectly influence access to resources and their benefits. Despite new approaches, such as those that attempt to integrate local level participation and introduce community-based forms of natural resource management, most national and local stakeholders recognise the variable, and sometimes poor, performance of these initiatives.

A recently completed DFID research project under the Natural Resources Systems Programme, "*Integrated floodplain management – institutional environments and participatory methods*", undertook a review of these formal and informal institutional arrangements and their impact on the performance of integrated floodplain management (IFM).

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"*Integrated floodplain management – institutional environments and participatory methods*" (R8195)



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Defining the "institution"

There are many technical definitions of the "**institution**" but it has been found helpful to agree a very simple and workable use of the word as meaning "*regular patterns of behaviour*" or simply "*ways of getting things done*". In turn, these institutions are comprised of: "**formal institutions**" as visible structures like organisations or committees and; "**informal institutions**", as less tangible entities such as culture, power relations and religious norms.

In reality, these institutions interact so that it difficult to discuss the function of one without the other. The performance of the Union Parishad council is best understood in relation to the role of *samaj* and national or local party politics, for instance.

Institutions and approaches to floodplain management

Over the last two decades, in Bangladesh as elsewhere, both donors, government and NGOs have experimented with community-based natural resource management, either as *ad hoc* and localised initiatives or as part of some form of nationwide approach or policy as co-management. In addition, increasing interest in the participation of primary stakeholders in the design and management of floodplain initiatives led to the proliferation of new "resource management institutions" (RMIs) at the local level. In Bangladesh, the key sectors have all implemented such an approach in at least some of their projects or programmes. The facilitating sector in question will have its own objectives (policy objectives or other drivers), approaches to management (activities and focus) and characteristic RMI models. In each case, both the purpose of participation and of the RMI varies across sectors (Table 1).

	Fisheries Sector	Water Sector	Environment Sector
Facilitator	DoF	BWDB	National NGOs
Participation	Group formation & light support	Group formation & planning	Continuous, advisory
Purpose	Increased fish production	Flood management % agric. protection	Habitat management
Structures (RMIs)	Fixed groups	Fixed, hierarchical groups	Resource management & AIGA* groups

Table 1. The typical mode & purpose of participation in projects.
(*Alternative Income Generating Activity)

Another mode of floodplain management exists independently from external support or facilitation. "Local initiatives" are small-scale interventions for improved water management by, and normally on behalf of, local users. They are generally seasonal and repeated annually and are significant because they appear to optimise farming and fishing returns for a broad range of stakeholders.

Key observations

Analysis of these modes of intervention from the national to the local level, and with special attention to the role of informal institutions, revealed the following general interrelated themes:

- 📄 Production-oriented management interventions are particularly prone to manipulation by elites (especially interventions that subsidise access or inputs)
- 📄 Sector-specific interventions can widen the difference in interests between livelihoods groups, creating conflict (large engineering schemes can introduce new incentives for some and constraints for others, for example)
- 📄 RMI design cannot be viewed in isolation from "approach" (i.e. the purpose and approach of intended management can be as significant as the form and design of the committee)
- 📄 Some institutions fail because the incentive for participation and support does not exist (e.g. structures for operation and maintenance within the water sector)
- 📄 Holistic and integrated approaches such as those within environment programmes may be less likely to attract unwanted entrants or wealthy elites
- 📄 Elites can work to support or destroy new RMIs and activities (at least, the activities as they were intended)
- 📄 Holistic and integrated approaches that attempt to incorporate wider livelihoods concerns are more difficult to communicate to target stakeholders
- 📄 The sustainability of participation and RMIs seems to relate to the perceived value and local legitimacy of activities and structures
- 📄 The perceived value and legitimacy of activities and structures relates to the level of understanding by target groups
- 📄 GO or NGO staff and local stakeholders can develop their own informal institutions ("ways of doing things") that can consolidate management arrangements (e.g. Oxbow Lakes Project)

- ❑ Informal institutions such as the mosque committee, the *samaj* or local approaches to common property (*de facto* access to resources) may function to legitimise or challenge new RMIs
- ❑ Conventional wisdom on the sustainability of management in relation to biophysical characters do not always hold true (e.g. small, bounded waterbodies are sometimes less successful management units than open beels)
- ❑ The greatest opportunities for up-scaling IFM, in Bangladesh, appear to operate at the national and local scale, rather than the regional scale
- ❑ Nationally, new policies are starting to stress cross-sectorality and call for integration at ministerial level
- ❑ Locally, knowledge of local constraints (skills, capacity knowledge) and local processes might enable up-scaling
- ❑ Some types of intervention can only be replicated by delimiting the “resource” and excluding potential users.

Key opportunities and recommendations

- ❑ Because floodplain management performance (outcomes and impacts) relate very closely to approach and objective (and hence the identity of the agency), IFM agencies should carefully consider their future role and approach in the light of past performance
 - ❑ The participation process within IFM interventions must be carefully aligned to co-learning and awareness building rather than the forced construction of RMIs with set roles and functions
 - ❑ The “blue-print” approach to local management should be re-assessed
 - ❑ All stakeholders should understand the problem of assuming homogenous and harmonious “communities”
 - ❑ The agency staff that interface with primary stakeholders must be aware of the type of processes that can evolve locally and of ways to avoid or deflect them (socio-economists and social scientists could play a key role in the entire process, not just the scoping and inception phase).
 - ❑ Relevant tools to map relationships and institutional performance (such as “process documentation”) should be communicated to local level staff and should be an integral part of monitoring and evaluation
- ❑ Staff should be aware of the performance and potential of existing institutions (such as the mosque committee) and local initiatives in supporting sustainability and pro-poor objectives of interventions
 - ❑ Tools such as institutional mapping may reveal sympathetic “platforms” such as the *salish* or mosque committee or local institutions that currently perform similar function to intended RMIs
 - ❑ Activities should attempt to be inclusive rather than exclusive (even if this involves the less vulnerable)
 - ❑ If activities cross-cut livelihoods concerns they are less likely to be usurped by the wealthy
 - ❑ The “elite” should not always be avoided or confronted – they can operate as powerful brokers on behalf of initiatives and add legitimacy, gain additional political and financial support
 - ❑ Up-scaling successful IFM can be achieved by capacity building at local level (increasing the role of social scientists in extension, site selection and consolidating support to key local government organisations such as the LGED)
 - ❑ Policy should centre on wise water management and government should re-align existing agencies and institutions (“ways of doing things”) to coordinate and implement this.

Summary

Although there are numerous obstacles to IFM, it appears there are also many opportunities for improvement in future. The significance of local and pre-existing relationships between resource users and others, with their own interests, is now more widely recognised within both Government and NGO initiatives. Where some form of “social reconnaissance” and/or “institutional mapping” at the early stages of projects is being applied, a greater understanding of the potential opportunities and constraints to uptake and support for activities is developed. Sympathetic and supportive institutions (whether local government or local level informal processes such as the *sama*) and individuals with the potential to advocate potential activities can be pro-actively targeted. In doing so, IFM interventions must move away from a rigid “blue-print” approach and acknowledge that the “gate-keepers” that control financial, social and political support for new modes of management may differ from site to site.

Ideally, the use of reflective and adaptive approaches to institution building will expand and new methodologies will be utilised to map and monitor IFM-related institutions as they evolve.

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