



“Our Forest, Our Life”: A Community-based Action towards the Sustainability of the Sundarbans Reserve Forest

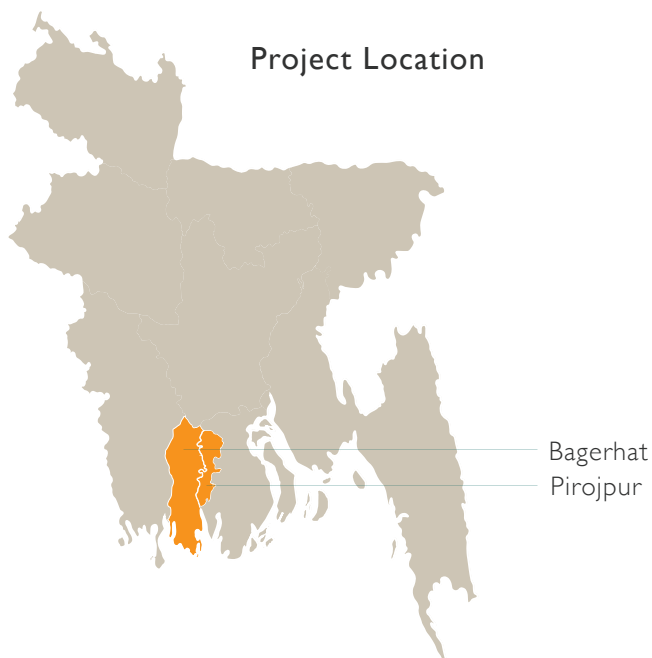
PROJECT BRIEF

Status: Completed
Date: February 2012-April 2015
Project Participants: 104,485 people
Funded by: European Union
Partners: Government of Bangladesh Forest Department, Departments of Agriculture Extension, Fisheries and Livestock Services, Union Parishad, Union Disaster Management Committees, Upazila and District Administration

DID YOU KNOW?

- The 'Sundarbans' is the world's largest mangrove forest in the world, spread across India and Bangladesh.
- The forest was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, and is the source of livelihoods for millions of people living in the neighboring areas, working as woodcutters, fishermen, and collectors of honey, plant leaves and various species of grass.
- The Sundarbans Reserved Forest occupies an area of around 6,017 square kilometers or 600,000 hectares. representing 51 percent of the total reserved forest area of Bangladesh and as such forms a rich and diverse ecosystem with potential for sustainable natural resource management.

Project Location



PROJECT GOAL:

To reduce the human pressure on the Sundarbans by increasing the sustainability and productivity of forest resources through community action.

Key Objectives

- Improved food security and reduced dependency of forest resource harvesters through improved forest product value chains and alternative livelihoods,
- Disaster resilient Sundarbans Impact Zone communities dependent on forest resources and,
- Protection of Sundarbans Reserved Forest improved through strengthened grassroots institutions contributing to active co-management committees.

World Vision Bangladesh with Forest Department of Bangladesh implemented a European Union funded three-year project named “**Our Forest, Our Life**”: A Community based Action towards the Sustainability of the Sundarbans Reserve Forest in the southwest coastal region of the country to improve the biodiversity of the forest, reduce the risk of disaster in Sundarban dependent communities and develop alternative livelihoods for 20,897 families. It was a three-year project implemented in 2012-2015.

PROJECT INTERVENTIONS AND KEY RESULTS:



- 1 Sundarban-dependent communities were empowered to pursue alternative livelihoods and as a result, reduced pressure on forest resources:** 3,514 men and 1,486 women pursued enterprise training such as fish culture, goat rearing, crab fattening, poultry, and small trade/business and cash support. These participants also formed 211 savings and loan group, who observed a cumulative increased savings of BDT 5,121,939 (€52,223) by the time the project ended in 2015. The support helped members to start small enterprises and reduced their borrowing costs, which would have been incurred when borrowing from high-interest money lenders. In the final evaluation of the project found that 94.14% project participants started earning an income from their initiatives and the average monthly net income from the alternative income generation activities is BDT7,070 (€68). This turned in reducing dependency (65.5%) on forest resources.



- 2 The project redirected a generation of children from forest-dependent livelihoods to alternative and dignified livelihoods:** Bringing young child-extractors in the school and adolescent-extractors in vocational training actually changed lives of children and redirected a generation from forest extortion to alternative and dignified livelihoods. The project created opportunity for 1,000 out-of-school children (9-15 years old) to engage in non-formal education; by the end of the project, 84.2% of those students re-joined as students in adjacent government primary schools. 1,000 adolescent children (up to 16 years old) received vocational training; by the end of the project, 51% adolescent participants started applying their learnings and were self-employed, while 14% were gainfully employed in other institutions. Even though their income was not high, the children could see the benefits of a safe, dignified alternative profession - a great driver behind reduced forest extortion.



- 3 Improving the trade and marketing system for Collector Groups resulted in a 20% increase in collectors' income:** The project formed 172 collector groups with 3,955 male and 2,122 female collectors to increase their profit by applying the value chain approach, by strengthening group operations, selling cooperatively, applying market information and contracts to achieve higher prices. The collectors also established linkages with collectors, different market actors, and support service providers that contributed for better price of their products.
- 4 Collective approaches to empowering women helped to boost incomes, status and decision-making power in the home:** To build the courage and skills of women, the project assisted the formation of 70 women's collective groups of 2,082 women in Mongla, Morelganj and Bhandaria. They were trained on how to support the income generating activities and collector groups in product development, marketing, and calculation of costs and benefits. Members' knowledge and skills in marketing specific products, product design, production and processing and other technical skills contributed to boosting their income, while enhancing the status and decision-making power of women in their family, and changing the community's perception of them.



5 Multi-faceted disaster management efforts that address both conservation and disaster risk reduction helped equip communities to be more resilient: The project established multi-level integrated disaster management systems in the 16 unions. This contributed to reducing the potential loss of lives and assets from disasters. World Vision formed Ward Disaster Management Committees, organized risk & vulnerability assessments and plans, held sessions in working sites for savings and loan group members on disaster risk reduction issues and conservation measures, and hosted drama shows to raise awareness about community level disaster preparedness. As a result, the people in the villages are now more familiar with the government's Standing Orders issued during Disasters (SODs) and warning signals. Now the WDMC are well understood and linked with UDMC for risk reduction in the community. In the impact evaluation, it was found that 84% of wards are implementing their DRR plan.



6 Strengthening the partnerships between communities and the Government Forest Department through a co-management was an important aspect of sustainable forest conservation: The project organized 91 awareness seminars for 3,185 collectors to increase their understanding of the co-management approach in forest conservation and how the community can help to protect the Sundarbans resources and assist the Forest Department in advancing conservation efforts, and how the government can assist the community in their practice of sustainable forest conservation. The initiative strengthened interaction between CMCs and project's target beneficiaries and increased the environmental good practices regarding resource collection adopted by most of the collectors targeted by the project.



I no more need to go to Sundarbans for my livelihood. We never knew there are so many alternative ways of earning if we didn't get oriented and trained. Now I can afford three meals a day for my family.



.....says Monirul, a project beneficiary



EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

A post evaluation after 5 years of project implementation: An evaluation team conducted a post evaluation in May 2019 to see impacts of the project. The team met with different participants of the project. Here were key findings:



Trainings on different income generating activities supported communities to start alternative incomes. It also reduced dependency on money lenders.



Co-management committees were still working well even after four years of the project ending. The members were actively disseminating messages to the extractors to stop going to the forest, and to stop malpractice of the collectors. The committee reported to have planted between 30,000 to 35,000 trees amongst their homesteads or within their cultivated land.



Ward Disaster Management Committee members said how Sundarbans protected them from the cyclone & storm surge. They sat for the meeting for Cyclone FANI preparation and aware people to take preparedness measures and asked to go to the shelters. They took the disaster preparedness measures, preserve dry food & drinking water, based on signal go to shelters according to the training they received.



The children (9-15 years old) who participated in non-formal education are in secondary education now. They stopped collecting resources from the forest.



Vocational training recipients stopped collecting resources from the forest.



Collector Group now collect shrimp fry, fish fry from nearby river and sell them to the wholesaler to earn more. They are aware about proper resource collection from the forest.



Those who pursued alternative income generating activities were still earning well. Many participants had since replicated and expanded their businesses. They also noted that their children were attending school since they could pay for educational expenses with their income.

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