

# Right Time for a "Rights Approach"

by Rolf C Carriere

WORLDWIDE, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has become the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. Only 13 countries have neither signed nor ratified this document. It is also one of the most comprehensive human rights documents, including civil, political, economic and social rights of children.

This widespread recognition of every child's right to **survival, protection, development, and participation** reflects the beginning of an historic international movement which has been gaining momentum daily. Its ultimate success depends on the involvement of people both in official and unofficial capacities — government policy-makers, NGOs, private business, professionals, artists, thinkers, religious leaders, communities and families.

Children's rights should no longer be considered the responsibility of the social welfare ministries alone. Political recognition, preservation, and promotion of children's rights must be viewed as the equal and collective responsibility of all government ministries, and members and organizations of civil society.

To promote and sustain economic development in the future, an accelerated and sustained investment in the health and productivity of this country's children must be initiated today. There is simply no other way.

## Reporting on the Convention

Bangladesh showed its commitment to child rights at an early stage. It was one of the first nations to ratify the Convention, which became international law in September 1990. Just over five years ago. Meanwhile, the Government of Bangladesh has been actively preparing and refining its first country report to the Convention's "Committee of Experts."

The purpose of this report is to monitor the progress of individual countries in im-

plementing the Convention, and to provide the basis for constructive comments on the important issues the country faces in implementing the Convention. In contrast to other human rights groups the committee's approach is not to condemn and accuse, but to ask: "how can we help?" The Committee's review also can provide a useful exchange of ideas on how other countries have tackled certain issues, and what might work for Bangladesh. UNICEF is deeply committed to this process, and will continue to offer assistance to the Government of Bangladesh as they work to fulfil the provisions of the UN Convention on Child Rights.

## Mid-decade Goals for Children and the Right to Survival

Bangladesh's accomplishments in the field of child **survival** — family planning, sanitation, and access to water supply and health services — have been significant.

Bangladesh is on target to meet all mid-decade goals except those related to malnutrition. Most of these end-1995 goals for immunization, water and sanitation, and school enrollment have already been attained. Vitamin A supplementation, breast-feeding promotion and salt iodization programmes are all underway, and show good success.

The scale of the problem of malnutrition can be intimidating. Recognizing the complex dynamic between malnutrition, poverty and behavior can easily lead to cynicism and resignation about the inevitability of hunger and malnutrition in Bangladesh. But we must not allow ourselves the luxury of such passive attitudes. If we do, we will find ourselves believing that nothing can be done, and then nothing will be done.

Bangladesh is now at the crossroads, and is ready to shed these unhelpful attitudes as it tackles the prob-

lem of malnutrition. The Prime Minister has just inaugurated a comprehensive World Bank-UNICEF assisted nutrition programme which aims to target very young children and pregnant mothers, and prevent malnutrition through the combination of education, social mobilization and targeted supplementation. Meanwhile, preparation is underway for a massive new population and health programme, POP-V.

Investing in children and women is a matter of humanity and equity, a matter of human rights — of saving lives and preventing human suffering. But perhaps more significant is the fact that such investment offers the most direct means of attacking poverty, and establishing a sound basis for future growth.

## The MOU and the Right to Protection

Bangladesh has taken significant steps this year toward protecting the interests of children who work in the garment sector. The "Memorandum of Understanding" between the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the International Labour Office (ILO), and UNICEF constitutes a promise made to the children who now work in the garment factories. Children are promised transitional education facilities, plus a stipend and other benefits. This would compensate for some of the income lost when entering school. They are promised re-employment after turning fifteen and, whenever possible, employment of other suitable family members in the meantime.

The process of negotiation and the final agreement can serve as a model for future reforms in child labour and child rights. The MOU exemplifies the importance of combining legal measures with responsible program-

ming to meet the needs of children and their families. Also, the MOU implicitly recognizes that enforcing laws against child labour, though necessary, is not sufficient in serving the "best interests of the child." Its promotion of "relevant basic education" as a solution to child labour will reap tangible benefits beyond compliance with labour laws. Increased access to education, and specific new education opportunities, will help to alleviate poverty — the root cause of child labour — and also delay the age of marriage and first conception.

Building an alliance between government leaders, private business, development partners (such as the US Embassy, ILO and UNICEF) and NGOs has been essential, though fraught with challenges along the way. The successful implementation of the MOU, and eventual elimination of child labour in Bangladesh, depends on nurturing these partnerships. Their collective contribution to child rights in Bangladesh cannot be overestimated.

If there is one thing that UNICEF has learned, it is that collaboration is indispensable. No government can be expected to fulfil the rights of children on its own. Not only are financial resources scarce, but so too are the human resources needed to advocate, mobilise communities, and implement. No longer is the business of development and of young human development an exclusive one. The corporate world also has social responsibility. Children are the business of everyone.

## Beijing and the Right to Education

Human rights have been the subject of discussion and consensus recently at the International Women's Conference in Beijing. One important theme of that conference was recognizing the connection between women's rights and human rights. The

rights of children are inseparable from both.

The "girl child" received well-deserved attention in Beijing, but remains at risk on the streets, in factories, and even in households. Special measures to increase enrollment of girls in primary school have been successfully initiated by the Government. UNICEF applauds Bangladesh's policy of compulsory primary education for all, with special incentives for girls up to class VIII. The challenge now is to keep these girls in school and help them attain the attitudes, knowledge and skills required to utilise their full potential as equal members in society.

To build an equitable society, all children — girls and boys — require relevant curricula and motivated teachers. Schools should be places where values such as rights and obligations, tolerance, respect, and appreciation of diversity are continually reinforced. Children should be able to learn and practice life-skills such as conflict-resolution, negotiation, and problem-solving. Only then will the next generation have the necessary tools — self-esteem, vision, and basic skills — to take advantage of opportunities, and create new roles, both as women and as men.

## Participation

Bangladesh has a strong tradition of community participation in cultural and artistic events. But giving children a voice in their community or society — to have them **enjoy participation** — remains a longer-term goal.

The importance of community and individual participation in health, economic and social welfare is beginning to gain widespread recognition the development community. UNICEF and ILO, in cooperation with the government and NGOs, have adopted a new research methodology, which "listens" to children. The pilot project — which is now being de-

veloped in many areas — has unraveled the capacity of children to talk about their feeling, their needs, fears and dreams. The "voices" of children are gradually being reflected in formulating programmes and projects that address their needs own choices.

## Conclusion

What kind of rewards can a society reap from a generation of children who have merely "survived", but have not received the nutrients essential for healthy functioning, have not attained a basic and practical education, have not enjoyed protection from hazardous labour, have not developed the tools or self-esteem to shape their own future?

This holistic view of the child's needs, of all children's needs — regardless of age, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or capabilities — is what UNICEF calls the "rights approach" to children's development. All of a child's basic rights should be viewed as indivisible. Moreover, a child must not just be a passive recipient of welfare, but must become an active actor to shape his or her future.

In Bangladesh, the rights approach is critical to the sustainability of goals reached through child survival and development programmes. Fulfilling children's rights is critical to economic growth and social development.

Here, I would like to repeat the words of Tayib Ali, a 10-year-old boy who spoke at the first Children's Rights Week in 1991. He said: "Let all children be seen with equal eyes. Let there be no barriers of class. Let shelter, food, medicine, education, play and music all be assured. We want the hope to live in good health and be free, and the confidence to stay alive."

When is the right time for a rights approach? Right now!

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# Nightmares from the Ever-shrinking Aral

**The town of Nukus is so badly affected by the rapid shrinking of the Aral Sea that a doctor who argued with his boss was sent to work there as punishment. Gemini News Service examines a little-known environmental disaster that has been described by a UN official as much greater than the Chernobyl nuclear explosion.**

Anthony Hyman writes from London

THE fine grit which coats the town of Nukus in southwestern Uzbekistan is no ordinary problem. With it comes contamination from salt and toxic chemicals kicked up from the exposed bottom of the shrinking Aral Sea.

The Aral has lost half its size in the past 30 years, leaving a huge desert of salt-saturated land exposed to the region's relentless winds. Massive dust storms have carried salt, sand and chemicals into agricultural regions, with deposits traced as far as the Himalayas and India.

An international conference (18-20 September) in Nukus is aiming to attract world attention and material aid to help save the Aral — once the world's fourth largest inland sea, after the

ure and birth defects. Soviet statistics in 1988 reported infant mortality at 25 of every 1,000 births. In Uzbekistan, the current number is 75 in 1,000, but doctors say it is generally believed to be worse.

Women and children are more affected than men, mainly because they do most of the work, picking cotton crops in highly-contaminated fields. In all, it is estimated that the health of half of Central Asia's total population of 58 million is affected, directly or indirectly.

Conference delegates say that in the Soviet drive for ever-larger crops of cotton, far too much water was taken from the two feeder rivers of the Aral Sea, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. Both cotton and rice are extremely water-intensive crops.

## Waters on the move



Caspian, Lake Superior on the Canada-United States border and Lake Victoria in East Africa.

The meetings are jointly organised by UN Development Programme (UNDP), the governments of the Central Asian republics, the World Bank and other UN agencies. More than 800 participants are expected to also discuss the poisoning of water resources by pesticides and the residue of fertiliser and salination.

Environmental issues in Central Asia have become steadily more prominent since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1989. The problems faced by the region are mostly man-made — chiefly caused by nuclear testing in Kazakhstan and the shrinking of the Aral, sparked by the diversion of water from the sea for use on the area's huge cotton crop.

Since the 1960s, the Aral Sea has shrunk from 66,000 sq km to 30,000 sq km. A 1993 report by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development warned that without remedial action, the sea would shrink further, to an area of just 9,000 sq km by the year 2015.

"The Aral tragedy is a much greater disaster than Chernobyl (the Soviet-era nuclear reactor in Ukraine which exploded in April 1986), but it's far less widely known in the outside world", comments Dr Abdu Kadir Ergashev, who works in the UNDP office in Tashkent.

A scientist specialising in environmental issues, Ergashev was Uzbekistan's Deputy Minister for the Environment from 1990 to 1993.

Nukus, one of the worst affected areas is not a popular place to work for the medical profession. One doctor from Tashkent who quarrelled with his superior says he was ordered to work there.

"It was a punishment — a bit like exile to Siberia — so much suffering so many young people in pain or dying who we could not help. I still have nightmares from my time spent there."

Doctors and UN sources say that cancer and intestinal illness have reached epidemic proportions in regions around the Aral Sea — most notably in the Karakalpakstan region of Uzbekistan and in border provinces of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Typhoid and hepatitis have increased rapidly in line with pollution of water supplies and overuse of toxic chemicals.

Although numbers are hard to ascertain, doctors in the region are reporting increased liver and kidney fail-

Today, a steady reduction in cotton acreage, combined with an effort to improve efficient use of scarce water resources, is expected to help slow the shrinking of the Aral.

Says Ergashev: "We need to change the mentality of the people. Water is free, therefore too often thought of as valueless. A price must be set for water, just as for gas or oil, to show that water is precious, and should not be wasted."

"For many centuries there was a very different attitude to water. Everywhere in Central Asia we have a proverb: 'Where there is water, there is life'. Our traditional way of life fully appreciated the value of water."

Some environmental improvements have been spurred by the growing market economy. High prices of fertilisers and chemicals has meant that farms are using far lower concentrations of chemicals for crops than in earlier years.

Yet some experts are pessimistic about the long-term damage inflicted by reckless state planning.

"The limits of expansion are clearly being felt, as the consequences of relying on unabated irrigation expansion for the cotton monoculture in the ecosystem," writes geographer Peter Sinnott in the book *Geographic Perspectives on Soviet Central Asia*.

Leaders of the five Central Asian republics, plus Russia, agreed in January 1994 to set up a permanent committee and joint fund to tackle the environmental and health problems associated with the Aral Sea region. They agreed to pay one per cent of their 1994 budgets to create a fund dedicated to these goals.

However, money is scarce and none of the governments has followed through. Kazakhstan has delayed its own programme to revive the Aral Sea by up to seven years, because of its severe budget deficits.

In 1992, Germany pledged medical equipment and other aid for Karakalpak hospitals worth 4 million marks. Last year Kazakhstan was offered \$62 million to help protect the environment by the United States and World Bank, as operations began for oil drilling in the Caspian Sea.

However, conference delegates acknowledge that without greater outside funding and foreign technical help, the prospects for saving the Aral look bleak.

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# Flood 95 : CPP (FAP 20) Experience

by Dr M Rafiqul Islam

IN July 1995, the CPP has experienced a flood of the magnitude of water level only 45 cm below '88 level and 40 cm above the danger level in Tangail.

This has happened at a period when the project was desperately looking for an alternative solution to restore the water flow caused by the closure of Dhaleswari river. The Dhaleswari river, main source of water to the project, was closed in November, 1994 as a requirement to provide security to the construction of the Jamuna Bridge.

The project, developed on the concept of controlled flooding and not flood control was relieved, at last, to see the water flowing through the project on June 18, 1995. Soon after, during the week of 10-15th July, CPP, only halfway through the construction, experienced its first flood.

## A Half-completed Project

With the revised target for completion of the project in '98/'99, the progress in development of physical infrastructures is 56 per cent. Divided the total project area into four clusters for physical development, work is almost complete in Cluster IB (NW), and 50 per cent in Clusters II (N) and III (NE) and nil in Cluster IV (S). At this rate of progress, it was premature to expect the desired functioning of a completed project, as indicated in recent news reports.

## The Silimpur-Karatia Embankment: Criticisms and Facts

The degree of protection the project has provided to the area during the flooding of '95 is mainly due to popularly known Karatia-Silimpur Embankment. Naturally due credit goes to people of Tangail, who around two decades ago, opted for this embankment. This irregular horse-shoe-shaped embankment runs very often through settlements, besides the kitchen of a house or by the vegetable gardens. Certain NGOs, linking this embankment to the CPP, blames the project on grounds of environmental consideration.

It is worth mentioning an incident regarding this embankment. During the early years of this project, many reports used to mention that the CPP is engaged in massive construction of an embankment. A high-ranking visitor from overseas concerned about embankment and its relationship to envi-

ronment, was particularly interested to see this embankment. He had a preconceived negative attitude to the project (expressed during discussion in office). The project officials did not try to refute him. Soon, everybody started for a field visit. An hour later, the distinguished visitor could not resist himself to ask us to show the embankment. We politely showed him that he was standing on the embankment. He had his day and hurriedly left. In general, most European visitors had similar experience.

## Institutional Set-up and Preparedness

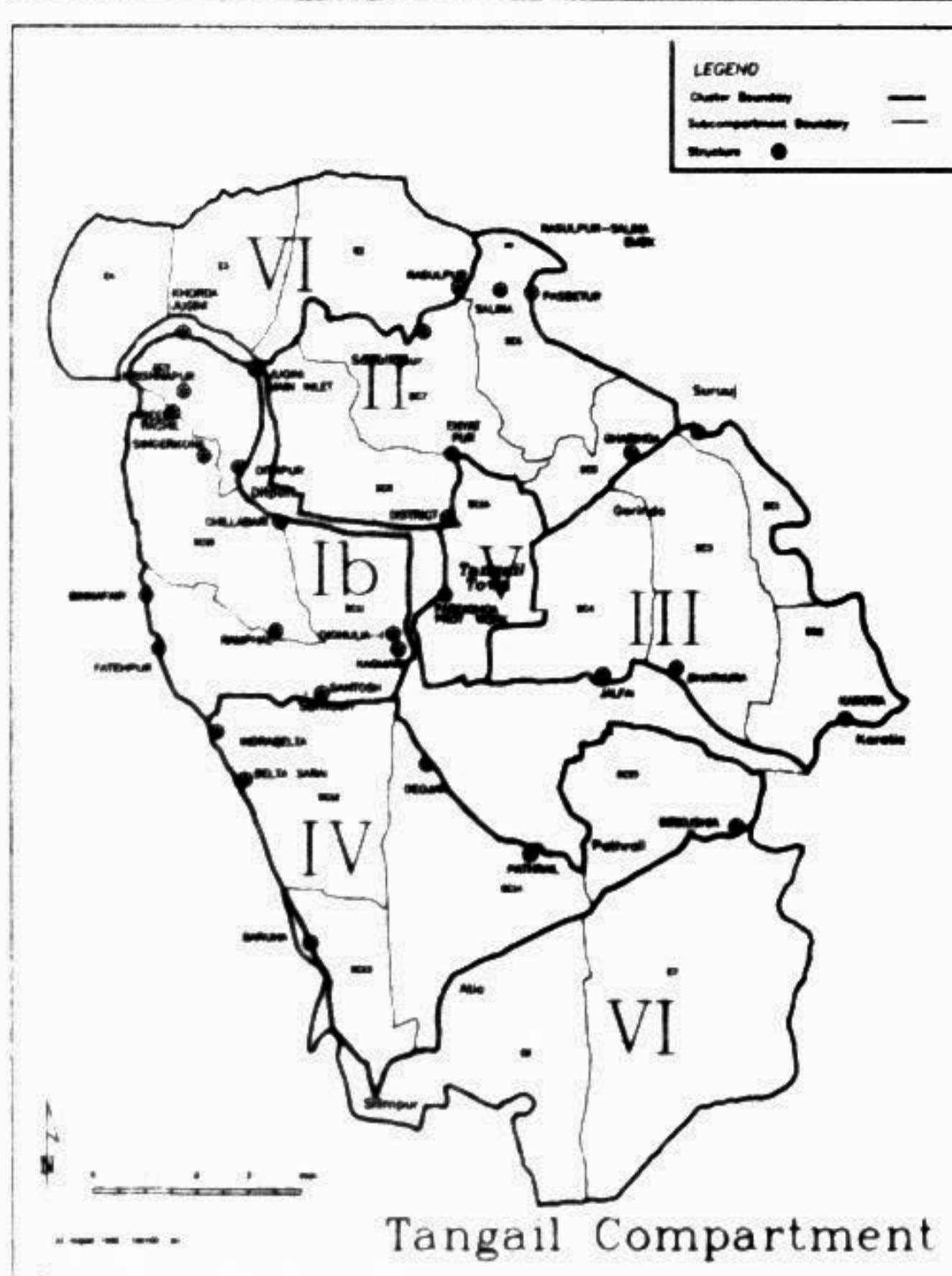
As mentioned before, the physical intervention is almost complete in three north-western subcompartments (Cluster IB). The responsibility of water management in these three and other subcompartments lies with Subcompartmental Water Management Committees (SCWMC). Each SCWMC headed by chairman union parishad, is composed of representatives of four different interest groups: farmers, fishermen, landless and women selected by local people.

Members of the SCWMCs were given seven-day residential training, through Dhaka-based NGO named TARD, on aspects of water management, group leadership and conflict management in the field.

Each SCWMC under its command area, has 2-4 small water control structures. SCWMCs have nominated gate operators for each of these structures from among village people. These gate operators were also trained on aspects of gate operation, maintenance and record keeping. It is planned that they will gradually replace traditional sluice-Khalashis.

## Experiences

It is through active participation of these people's institution that 80 per cent of the area of the three north-western subcompartments (Cluster IB) was not only protected but farmers and fishermen continued with normal farming, fishing activities. To elaborate further, these committees worked whole night, as the water level was rising, to identify ratholes on the embankment (Gopalpur in Dannya Chowdhury Union) only to be repaired by the project personnel. The project gives due credit to the active participation of local people without



whose support the situation in Cluster IB would have been different.

It is not possible to write this experience without mentioning two more incidents. In Barua of Silimpur Union, there was a newly completed structure without any gate. When some project personnel were making routine inspection on the morning of July 13, were surprised to observe that people themselves were installing gate with bamboo, earth-filled bags and tin.

In another place (Birnahali) in Cluster III along the Pungli river, there was an eroded embankment section. Because of delayed land acquisition procedure, the project could not do the necessary repair work. However during this flood, at the request coming from a gathering of 2000 or more, the project repaired that section within three days. Land and earth were arranged by the people.

With these examples described here, the project is convinced of an atmosphere of positive people — project cooperation to achieve the desired goal.

## Experiences Shared and Verified with Local NGOs

The project had an oppor-

tunity to discuss the experience of Flood 95 with local NGOs when World Bank Senior Executive Mr John D. Clark visited the project on 10th August, 95. In that discussion, a number of leading NGOs including SSS, Grameen Bank, Nijera Kori and UST were invited. In that meeting, NGOs, critical to the project, could not specify negative impacts of the project which can be field verified.

The singled out negative impact identified was the flood situation in the adjacent area immediately after the meeting, a joint tour was made in the area. After 15 days of flooding, farmers were then harvesting Aus crop or Jute. The claim that people had to leave their houses were found baseless when some of the houses were visited. However, the area had a higher water level for a short period of 3-5 days.

## Impacts of Flood '95

It is quite natural to expect a degree of damages to crops and infrastructure from a high flood of this magnitude. Even then, impact of the project was quite evident.

Tangail town, that went one meter under water in 1988 remained flood free. Eighty per cent of the area

in Cluster IB was completely damage-free. Absence of a gate at Kagmari caused damage to the rest 20 per cent of the area.

The project obtained the opportunity to test the concept of controlled flooding. Cluster IB or any other area of the compartment was never meant to be flood water free. Till July 10, flood water was allowed to enter through Katua Juguni, Binnafair, Fatehpur inlet structures to allow fingerling migration into the area and to supply water requirements for rice fields. Water level at Ghatakbari and Bara beels reached to a level favouring spawning of the beel resident fish species.

Within the project area, farmers are gradually shifting to higher yielding crop. Even Malati Prova Dey, one critique of FAP 20 and local NGO leader, stated that farmers have changed to higher yielding crop (Daily Star dated July 19, 1995) knowing that work of the FAP has been completed and that it would protect their crop from flood. The project is sympathetic to those farmers of areas where not yet water management system has been established and their standing crops were washed away during this flood. However, it shows that the project has already earned confidence of local farmers.

For the first time, people's institution and their operators have operated the gates according to their own decision. The project has, as policy, not interfered in their decision-making process. However, the project has monitored the decision-making process, only to refine project strategy.

## Fisheries

Tangail is known as one of the lowest inland fisheries producing district of Bangladesh. It is estimated that a loss of 97 tons/year would be incurred if no mitigation measures are taken. Hence, the project has taken a comprehensive fisheries mitigation measure to boost fisheries production over and above the estimated loss.

A number of structures have been designed to be fish-friendly. The project has introduced the beel concept to be applied on a number of perennial beels to favour the spawning of beel resident fish species.

Though not directly a mitigation measure, the project is encouraging aquaculture. More than 1,300 ponds have been directly brought under

aquaculture by imparting training to all interested pond owners. In addition, 25 pond owners have been provided training on nursery management.

## Environment

On the basis of comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), the project has made an Environmental Management Plan (EMP). This plan is now being implemented. The project has established a water quality laboratory. Apart from monitoring ground water level and water quality, the project has a modest social forestry programme. More than 12,000 trees of 40 different species have been planted. This programme, implemented through SCWMCs, emphasizes on plant diversification.

Further, a total of 50 farmers have already been trained on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) with direct cooperation from DAE Tangail-FAO, Dhaka. Additional 70 farmers are now being trained in this season.

## More Activities

- Activities related to women in development.
- Support study and drainage improvement work of Tangail Town.
- Strong training programme for field level extension personnel (including of NGOs) and PAPs (project affected people).
- Modelling and computer simulation of any expected scenario.
- An structured monitoring programme of progress and impact.

## Project Welcomes Constructive Criticisms and Alternative Suggestions

At present, this project tends to many often diverging aspects (engineering, modelling, social, institutional, bio-resources including environment). Interest groups (project affected people, policy planners, donors, journalists, anti-FAP national and international lobby, local elites, NGOs), water situation (high flood, normal flood, varying degree of rainfall drought) and requirement and expectation of the media (press and TV from local, national and donor countries). It is natural that the project will have judgements from people of diverse fields.

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