

Nature-based solutions to our societal challenges



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As we enter the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the societal challenges we were fighting in the pre-Covid times all got worse over the past two years—be it extreme poverty, food and water crises, biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, or climatic change and associated disasters. But, can nature still be a part of tackling these challenges?

When we harness nature to address our problems, we essentially implement nature-based solutions (NbS). While no UN agencies have adopted a universal definition of NbS yet, let's consider the most widely accepted definition suggested by the world's oldest and largest environmental network IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)—NbS interventions are the "Actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits."

NbS is separate from our typical rural development work involving natural resource management and pure conservation work. Community development often offers benefits to the human beings through, for example, crop cultivation, fish farming, and livestock rearing. Conservation, on the other hand, works essentially towards protecting certain species or ecosystems. NbS, however, offer both human and biodiversity benefits, not just one. Engaging local people in salt-tolerant rice cultivation in coastal Bangladesh to adapt to climate change, growing one tree species miles after miles as road-side plantation under social forestry, or using

bamboo fence (bandal) to protect river bank from wave erosion, for example, are good practices benefiting people. But none is NbS as they don't improve biodiversity directly. On the other hand, protecting the Sundarbans from over-exploitation through participatory models, sustainably managing Moulvibazar's Baikka Beel with the local community, restoring degraded coastal forests with diverse mangrove species by engaging local stakeholders, or creating a new wetland to slow down flood waters from entering an urban area are examples of NbS, as they benefit both people and biodiversity.

Over the last couple of years, NbS has widely been recognised by a wide range of national and global entities. In November 2021, for example, the highly anticipated Glasgow COP26 (Conference of the Parties) on climate change ended by drafting the "Climate Pact". This decision document doesn't use the term Nature-based Solutions or NbS, but has sufficiently incorporated the philosophy and approaches of NbS. Since September 2020, Bangladesh has been hosting the South Asia regional office of the Global Center on Adaptation (GCA). Infrastructure and NbS is one of the seven on-going programmes of the GCA. Recent analyses show that countries, especially the developing ones, identify NbS actions in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) pledges to reduce carbon emissions by 2030. In September 2021, IUCN World Congress held in Marseille, France declared a new Collaborative Certification Scheme to ensure sustainable NbS actions and impacts, which is expected to be introduced in 2022.



▲ Climate change is no longer a challenge to be faced by the people living on earth today only. It is a transgenerational crisis that will affect generations to come.

PHOTO: ARIFUR RAHMAN

While global climate change discourses strongly embrace NbS as a concept, it is a bit different elsewhere. For example, in July 2021, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), a multilateral global entity on biodiversity conservation, launched its first draft of the "Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework". This 12-page document outlines national to global conservation strategies and actions up to 2050, but doesn't recognise NbS per se as a concept or a guiding philosophy.

There are several reasons behind the increasing national and global support to NbS. Once implemented, NbS intervention can give multiple benefits. Let's take

conservation of the Sundarbans as an example of NbS. It protects us from cyclones and storm surges, captures carbon from the atmosphere, gives shelter to rich biodiversity, provides us with food, supports local livelihoods, gives space for eco-tourism, and upholds our culture and heritage. Every year, all the mangroves of the world give more than USD 65 billion coastal flood protection. Bangladesh enjoys USD 1.56 billion benefit annually from its mangrove forests. The country is also among the top three, along with India and Vietnam, receiving highest benefits from mangroves by protecting its people.

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