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**REDIRECTING BENEFITS TO GENUINE FISHERMEN:
BANGLADESH'S NEW FISHERIES MANAGEMENT POLICY**

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Mahfuzuddin Ahmed¹
International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management

Doris Capistrano
The Ford Foundation

Mokammel Hossain
Department of Fisheries
Dhaka, Bangladesh

¹For Correspondence:

International Center For Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM)
House No. 20, Road No. 9/A, Dhanmondi R.A., Dhaka-1209, Bangladesh
Tel:(880-2) 812466, Fax: (880-2) 884968

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Mahfuzuddin Ahmed (ICLARM), Doris Capistrano (Ford Foundation)
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ABSTRACT

In a bid to correct centuries-old exploitative modes of production and to ensure the productivity and sustainability of currently degraded, publicly owned inland openwater bodies, the Government of Bangladesh recently instituted drastic changes in its fisheries management policy. The policy of leasing out fishing rights to the highest bidders, who were invariably wealthy middlemen, was replaced by a policy granting direct fishing rights to genuine fishermen under a government administered licensing program. This policy shift is expected to redefine the system of property rights in favor of households directly dependent on fishing for their livelihood. It also raises questions on how the new policy could improve economic prospects for the intended beneficiaries, but that it would also require a mix of management and financial inputs, infrastructure facilities, and institutional support. This paper discusses an experimental mechanism through which these necessary inputs could be provided, i.e., through active involvement of fishing communities and non-government organizations (NGOs).

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I. BACKGROUND

Bangladesh is a deltaic country of the Ganges and Brahmaputra river systems situated at the Himalayan foothills off the Bay of Bengal (Fig. 1). The deltaic topography, changing courses of rivers and yearly occurring floods have resulted in four major types of fishery environments. These are:

1. Flowing rivers; 2. Dead rivers or ox-bow lakes (baors) resulting from the loss of flow when rivers change course; 3. Beels and haors or natural depressions in lowlying deltaic topography; and 4. Floodlands that get inundated during monsoon rains.

Excluding the floodlands, these water-regimes number more than 10,000 and occupy over 8% (12,200 sq.km) of the area of Bangladesh. The size of floodland ranges up to 5.5 million ha during the peak flood season (July-September). Over 60% of the country's yearly supply of fish comes from these environments, harvested mainly by fishers drawn largely from the poor and landless population. The government itself earns some one million dollars per annum in revenues by leasing out harvest rights in these fisheries.

Historically two distinct classes of people were involved in the organization of fishery activities. They are:

- the ordinary fishers who depend on fishing for food, income and livelihood; and
- the middlemen or entrepreneurial class engaged in bidding for lease and supplying capital at usurious rates of interest to fishermen.

Under the traditional system of management, individuals and groups of wealthy entrepreneurs lease the fishery from the government and then in turn sell fishing rights to ordinary fishers (Fig. 2a). Both the government, as seller of the lease, and the entrepreneurial class (leaseholders and their agents), as sellers of fishing rights to ordinary fishers on cost-plus terms, were able to secure their interests under this system. On the other hand, the system tended to be biased against the welfare of the fishermen as well as against the sustainability of fishery resources. These effects were evident from the gradual deterioration of the socioeconomic condition of fishermen community and the decline of productivity of the fisheries (Ahmed 1991).

II. CHANGE OF POLICY - OBJECTIVES AND GUIDELINES

In 1986 the government decided to pursue a new policy that would allow fishery access only to the genuine fishermen (Aguero and Ahmed 1990). The main objectives of the new fisheries management policy (NFMP) were:

- to free the fishermen from the strong dependency on and exploitation by the middlemen leaseholders and financiers;
- to redirect the major benefits of the fisheries to the genuine fishermen; and
- to ensure the conservation and propagation of fishery resources.

The main idea of the NFMP was to gradually abolish the system of leasing fisheries in open auction and to replace it with a gear-specific licensing system. Accordingly, in 1986 the new policy was implemented on a trial basis in 9 selected waterbodies covering rivers, baors and haors. This was extended to 150 waterbodies in 1988. Presently, about 300 waterbodies have been placed under the NFMP.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF THE NFMP

- Conservation: Under NFMP the government is expected to provide direct management support for conservation of resources. Emphasis has been given on the motivation and organization building of fisherfolk to ensure their participation in conservation. As such, effective measures to conserve and protect resources will be easier to implement.
- Efficiency: Efficiency will be improved under NFMP; efforts can be diverted into upstream (input supply) and downstream (post-harvest) ^{activities} to reduce uneconomic investment in fishing.
- Redistribution: Implementation of NFMP will enable ^{general} fishermen ^{to} become direct beneficiaries to fishing. Necessary institutional support can protect the fishermen from payment of usurious rates for borrowed capital and equipments.

IV. EARLY EXPERIMENTS IN MANAGEMENT UNDER THE NEW POLICY

The Government of Bangladesh in collaboration with ICLARM and with support from the Ford Foundation has been experimenting with several fisheries management strategies in order to best achieve the objectives of the NFMP. Three strategies were chosen for testing in the 9 fisheries brought under the NFMP in 1986:

- Department of Fisheries (DOF) providing direct fishing license and implementing fishing regulations with additional manpower and infrastructural inputs;
- DOF providing fishing licenses and implementing fishing regulations without additional manpower or infrastructural inputs; and
- Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) providing management inputs to licensed fishermen through group organization.

In all three cases, the assumption was that collateral-free credit for fishing inputs would be readily available to the fishermen from rural banking institutions such as the Bangladesh Krishi Bank. These strategies were compared with the traditional middlemen-managed fisheries under leasing arrangements administered through the Ministry of Lands.

Results reported during the initial years of performance monitoring showed a better economic performance in terms of returns to capital, labor and profit by the fishing units operating under licensing compared to those under leasing (Rahman 1989). Unfortunately, licensing management through the NGO and group organization of fishermen could not be implemented due to difficulties in resolving the transfer of authority to NGO management. Therefore, no conclusive results on NGO management could be drawn. However, the case for NGO involvement, particularly in the provision of credit, remains strong.

Two main problems were found to remain:

- Licensed fishermen still needed to rely on the middlemen for supply of equipment (e.g. boat and gear) and operating capital in the absence of institutional financing. As a result, a disproportionate share of revenue went to compensate the owners of capital.
- In the absence of any adequate assessment of the exploitable bio-mass and allowable fishing pressure in various fisheries and fishing environments the question of limiting fishing pressure to a sustained level of bioeconomic production remained unresolved.

Moreover, there remains a lack of alternative and supplementary income generating sources to divert pressure on direct fishing. In general fishing efforts are said to be in excess of what is required to sustain the current level of production (Ahmed 1991).

V. CURRENT EXPERIMENTS

Based on the results and feedback from these early experiments, a new phase is currently being implemented by DOF, again with technical assistance and funding from ICLARM and the Ford Foundation, respectively. In this phase, the government seeks to work in partnership with NGOs and the fishing communities in order to:

- increase participation of local fishermen in managing the fisheries;
- utilize NGO resources for input support to fishermen in place of middlemen; and
- mobilize NGO experience in human development training and organization building to create alternative or supplementary income opportunities for fishermen and thereby reduce pressure on the fisheries.

The current phase also expands the coverage from the nine sites in the first phase to twenty-one sites, thus including a wider range of fishing environments all over the country (Figure 1).

The Department of Fisheries and ^a few leading NGOs have agreed to collaborate in the following manner:

- DOF, concerned NGOs and local fishermen's associations will identify and list all persons dependent on fishing as primary source of income. A committee consisting of members from various Government departments, representatives of fishermen's associations and NGOs will approve the issuance of licenses to the listed fishermen by the thana (sub-district) fishery officer upon submission of proof of payment of a predetermined license fee.
- NGOs are expected to organize licensed fishermen into groups and provide the following services:
 - human development training;
 - training and motivation to create awareness for the conservation of fishery resources;

- group formation;
- organizing savings and collecting of savings fund; and
- provision of credits for fishery related and other income generating activities.

Production relations, benefit distribution and management of fisheries under NFMP through the involvement of NGOs are shown in Fig. 2(b).

VI. EMERGING TRENDS

Several trends have appeared in apparent response to the incentives associated with the current policy. In the Kanglar Haor (Fig. 1), for example, cooperative arrangements have evolved to both safeguard the fisheries from over exploitation as well as to spread the benefits from fisheries harvest and conservation. Fishermen are practicing self-regulation; they are adhering to a fishing schedule arrived at by consensus and recognized to be consistent with harvest rate that would maintain the productive capacity of the waterbody. They have agreed to compensate ~~for the cost of~~ inputs according to their marginal contributions and any excess income is distributed equally to the group members as dividends from the fisheries stock.

A similar trend of self-regulation has been observed in the beel environment. In Hamil Beel (Fig. 1) where more than 150 fishermen operate in a 30-hectare water area, the practice of seasonal closure of fishery emerged through a process of consensus. The fishery is closed during the early monsoon season to allow the fish to breed and to allow the young to grow to a marketable and harvestable size. Fishermen in organized groups have also begun practicing artificial stocking to enhance and replenish fish stocks in the beel.

The involvement of NGOs is expected to further strengthen and support these trends. Their role in organization building, skills development, credit financing, and creating alternative and supplementary income generating activities would enable fishermen to

practice better management, derive greater benefits from fisheries, and diversify into non-fishing and non-fishery activities. All these are expected to lead to the more sustainable use and management of fisheries resources. At the same time, NGOs are also expected to contribute to furthering socially desirable ends. These would include empowerment of the fishermen as a class through their increasingly effective control of the fisheries and of inputs which the middlemen used to provide at usurious rates.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The scattered pieces of evidence point to a process of ~~the~~ evolution from what used to be open access, over-exploited fisheries into community-managed common property fisheries which have the potential of becoming sustainable over the long term. Since under NFWP licensed fishermen would become the sole beneficiaries of fisheries, fishermen can be motivated to increase their sense of ownership of fishery resources. This will facilitate both the conservation of resources and the protection of community interests.

VIII. REFERENCES

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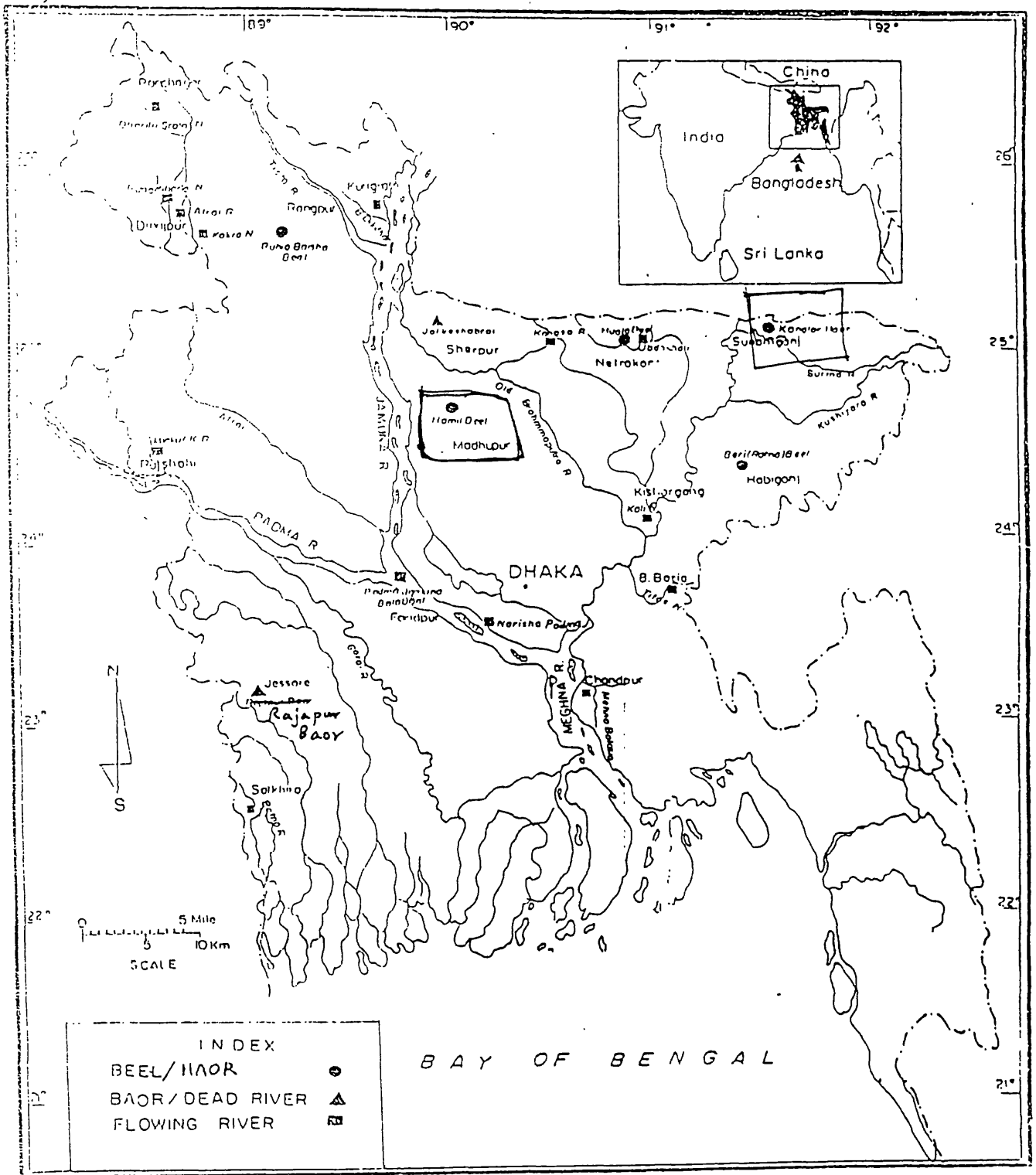


Fig. 1. Map of Bangladesh showing locations of various waterbodies under the project improved management of openwater fisheries.

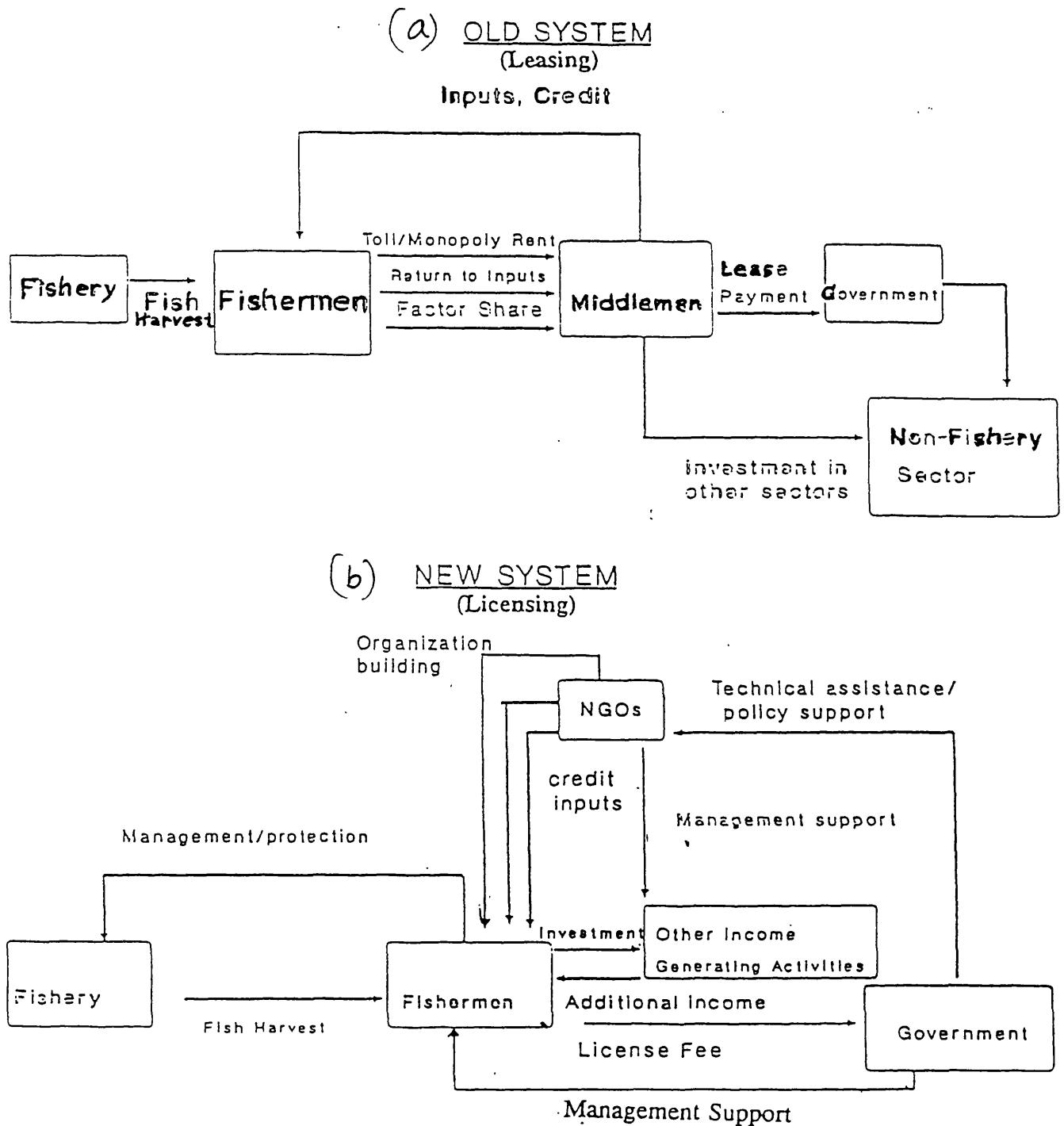


Fig. 2. Production Relations, Benefit Distribution and Management Implications: Old (leasing) vs. New (licensing) Systems of Fisheries Management in Bangladesh.