



## Request for Research Proposals Deadline: 13 February, 2015



### **Action Research for Policy Reforms to Enable Improved Community Co-Management of Wetlands in Bangladesh**

The John D. Rockefeller 3<sup>RD</sup> Scholars Program, in collaboration with Winrock International's Climate Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods (CREL) project, funded by the US Agency for International Development, seeks proposals for applied research on community co-management of wetlands in Bangladesh. The goal of the research is to assist local communities, the Government of Bangladesh, and funders in making better informed decisions on policies and programs to protect freshwater wetlands.

In order to submit a proposal, please form a multi-disciplinary team of three researchers under age 45 (see *Application Instructions*). The winning proposal will be awarded a one-year grant of up to US \$25,000 in March 2015.

#### **Problem Statement**

Freshwater wetlands, particularly “Haor” systems, are a unique feature of Bangladesh's floodplain. Vast expanses are seasonally submerged with the onset of the monsoon, preserving rich habitats for biodiversity throughout the year. Haors are most common in northeastern Bangladesh where the foothills meet the plains. They connect to big rivers and channels and are considered “mother fisheries” or hatcheries for freshwater species with unique swamp forest habitats. These fish are an important source of protein for millions of poor people. Haors have been threatened for years due to over-harvesting, and subjected to skewed tradeoffs that pit economic interests against the environment. Co-management was established in these areas in 1998. USAID and other foreign assistance agencies supported work with local communities, establishing community-based Resource Management Organizations (RMOs) to better protect and manage wetland resources. In Hail Haor, USAID's Management of Aquatic Ecosystems through Community Husbandry (MACH) Project operated from 1998 to 2005. MACH built several tiers of community organizations and linked communities with the local administration for better governance of wetlands, including protecting water flow and resources. This succeeded in improving community leadership and social cohesion, and increasing biodiversity and conservation. Communities organized into eight RMOs, which established fish sanctuaries, observed closed seasons when most fish spawn, ended dewatering, re-excavated silted-up waterbodies, planted swamp trees, and occasionally released locally scarce fish species.

Evidence from around the world shows that community-based approaches to conservation can successfully create a sense of collective ownership, enhancing outcomes and enforcement of conservation rights and regulations. However, in Bangladesh, a legal basis for community co-management has yet to be adopted and recognized by the Government. As a result, the communities of Hail Haor continue to be under threat of losing valuable wetland resources, sanctuaries and waterbodies due to increasing demand for resources, short-term thinking, and large private and commercial interests that use unsustainable practices, such as commercial fishermen working under elite leaseholders. The Ministries of Land, Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment, along with the Wetland Custodian District Administration, are guided by wetland leasing policies that prioritize revenue-based wetland resource entitlements. The 2009 Wetland Leasing Policy and other fisheries-related policies do not have clear provisions allowing, or

giving equal rights to, community-based wetland resources management. Institutional reforms are needed to establish longer-term and more sustainable usufruct and access rights, which will allow community RMOs to more effectively limit wetland use by large private and commercial interests.

### **JDR 3<sup>RD</sup> Scholars Applied Research Team**

The JDR 3<sup>RD</sup> Scholars Program seeks to commission a multidisciplinary applied research study on community co-management of wetlands in Bangladesh, in locations where the CREL project aims to improve governance of natural resources and strengthen legal and policy frameworks for collaborative management with communities. The JDR 3<sup>RD</sup> Program's science-action-policy approach is ideally suited to involve communities in assessing the benefits of haor systems, in order to transfer technical knowledge to young community leaders for sustainable resource management. The approach will also provide high quality recommendations to policymakers for immediate actions aimed at wetland protection through improved community co-management.

The winning research team will be chosen through a competitive process (see *Application Instructions*). The team will be advised by an expert review committee, facilitated by Winrock, made up of decision makers who can act on the team's recommendations. In addition, teams will have access to a distinguished network of policymakers and scientific leaders including former Agricultural Development Council (A/D/C) fellows and current Winrock and USAID experts.

### **Research Objectives, and Key Questions**

The main objectives of this research are to:

1. Evaluate the impact of community co-managed haors as compared to traditionally leased haors/wetlands.
2. Define institutional and biophysical criteria which can be used as indicators of effective co-management in haor systems.
3. Build the capacity of community-based RMOs to monitor and assess natural resources, ecosystem health, and the distribution of benefits from co-management, by directly involving community-based RMOs in the research project.
4. Collect and analyze data, and synthesize findings for presentation to policy makers to inform changes to wetland policies based on an improved understanding of the outcomes of community co-management of wetlands.
5. Recommend procedures for improving the effectiveness of community-based RMOs at sustainably managing wetlands, and advocating for policy changes to ensure wetland sustainability.

Research questions:

1. What is the difference in ecosystem health over time in a community co-managed wetland as compared to a privately managed wetland?
2. What is the difference in the distribution of ecological and social benefits in a community co-managed wetland as compared to a privately managed wetland?
3. What biophysical criteria should community-based RMOs use to determine whether they are succeeding in conserving wetland resources over time?
4. What institutional criteria should be adopted to determine whether a community-based RMO has the necessary skills and resources to sustainably co-manage a wetland? (For example, criteria could measure the effectiveness of processes for

participatory decision-making, changes in wetland characteristics due to land management practices, and differences in resource governance mandates within different RMOs.)

5. What set of performance indicators should a community use to understand whether a wetland is being properly managed?
6. What set of performance indicators should policy makers agree to understand whether a wetland is being properly managed?

In addition to extensive review of existing literature and data, policies and prior recommendations, the research project must include fieldwork to gather original data. Fieldwork should include joint monitoring exercises, PRAs, and interviews or surveys of key stakeholders, including community and NGO representatives, public and private sector leaders, and policy-makers.

### **Involvement of Key Decision-Makers**

Teams should involve key decision makers<sup>1</sup> in their research. The following are examples of how key decision makers might participate:

- Involve key decision makers from the Ministry of Land and Ministry Fisheries and Livestock in the development of the research proposal (e.g. setting research questions, objectives and methodology, etc.).
- Involve representatives of community organizations in developing indicators; collecting data in the field; and conducting cross-visits in similar places for sharing and comparing lessons in participatory monitoring.
- Hold stakeholder workshops during and after the research, to inform and update key decision makers who can use the research findings.
- Regularly consult with relevant GOB departments at the local level (Departments of Fisheries, Environment, and Agricultural Extension; Upazilla level officers; Jalmohal committees; Land and District Administrations).
- Include professionals (divisional/district or national level officials) from concerned GOB agencies as team members.

### **Outputs**

Expected outputs of this research project are:

1. Sound research design.
2. Statistically significant data collected and analyzed.
3. A high-quality report describing the research objectives, methodology, results, and resulting policy recommendations.
4. A science-policy workshop and a stakeholder workshop involving key decision makers, highlighting the socio-ecological importance of co-management.
5. A concise policy brief targeted at specific high-level policy makers, highlighting key findings and recommendations for policy change.

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<sup>1</sup> **Key decision makers** are people who are in a position to co-analyze results and adjust policies and/or legal frameworks according to the findings of this study. They may be affiliated with a community, Government, NGO, or business concerned with wetland resource management in Bangladesh, particularly in the northern regions.



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6. Practical and participatory tools that community-based RMOs can use for wetland monitoring, equitable distribution of wetland benefits, and improved governance of wetland resources.
7. A draft paper for an international peer-reviewed journal (to be co-authored by Winrock).

### Outcome

The expected outcome of this research is that key decision makers in Government, donor agencies and science communities will have improved understanding of the benefits of wetland co-management by community-based RMOs, and will receive targeted guidance to improve the 2009 Wetland Leasing policy and other relevant policies and regulations for sustainable management.