The Nishorgo Network:
Will it be a Permanent Feature of Bangladesh or a Passing Project Activity?

The "Nishorgo Network" was conceived as a means of providing unity of image, strategy and approach across all those wetlands and forests in Bangladesh that were managed with the common characteristics of being pro-poor, conservation-focused and collaboratively managed. The idea was that all such areas around the country – no matter how they were formed or who formed them (communities, donors, government) – would benefit from having a common identity and name. The corollary was that if all such areas had a common image, brand and name, then they could better withstand the local attacks to their viability (e.g., overturning wetland leases or stealing forest timber) that occur so often. And, with a common image and organizational identify, the many areas and their managers would have a stronger voice in national fora and institutions.

The USAID IPAC project facilitated a discussion about this network with the three key government partners supporting wetland and forest conservation (Dept of Environment, Dept of Fisheries and Forest Department) in 2009, and all agreed that there should be a network, and that it should be called the "Nishorgo Network".

The Nishorgo Network meant all those areas at which pro-poor, co-management and conservation were being implemented. Initially, the Network was assumed to include all those areas being supported directly by the three partners. But it was assumed also that – if the Network image succeeded – then other wetland and forest co-managed sites would want to join this country-wide affiliation of areas.

The IPAC project worked to develop a common image for the Nishorgo Network (a brand) and materials that would describe sites within the network. The IPAC project also worked to build the capacity and awareness of Co-Management Organizations (CMO) around the country, and worked to help those CMO band together in an affiliated set of federations.

While considerable progress has been achieved in this process, there is now one important shortcoming: the Nishorgo Network has now become so closely identified with USAID and IPAC that many or most stakeholders think that the Nishorgo Network IS a USAID project. This is due in part to the diligence with which USAID branding guidelines have been applied to all materials produced by the IPAC project, including anything to do with the Network. This extremely close association between Nishorgo Network and USAID raises the risk that it will not be taken up by Bangladeshi organizations and individuals, as it will be seen as an exogenous or foreign created and supported organization.

In the final year of IPAC, it is now urgent that some distance be created between the Nishorgo Network as a sustainable, locally owned affiliation of PA sites and the USAID image and logo. In order to do this, a number of important steps need to be taken, including the following:

- Identify a Bangladeshi partner or partners with their own interest in facilitating, mentoring and supporting the Nishorgo Network with their own capacities, and in their own inistitutional interest. (The project has begun this dialogue with a number of potential partners.)
- Prepare the parameters for how the IPAC project can support this institution in taking a leading role in the growth and consolidation of the Nishorgo Network and its CMO members. These support activities would include:
  - o Including the identified partner in all Network planning events;
  - o Support the partner in convocation of Network meetings, events and plans
  - o Support the partner in access and use of information and materials developed under IPAC project.
- There are two central and critical activities that this identified partner would undertake in IPAC year 5 with close support from the IPAC team:
  - o First, the partner would organize and put in place a "Knowledge Portal" which would include the wide range of information, maps, matewials, documents that have been collected and or developed by IPAC on the subject of the Network. We would propose to work with the partner to develop their own website and parallel materials to this end.
  - o Second, we would undertake continued meetings with the members of the Nishorgo Network around the country, but we would put this partner in a leading role as the convenor of the meetings with CMO and other Nishorgo Network site members. Our field staff would facilitate the process by which Nishorgo Network members began to see that the identified partner was the one that would continue to support the Network, and not the IRG project.
- Pursuing this program of transferring Network facilitation and leadership to a Bangaldeshi partner institution will require some shifts in the branding approach used to date. We would expect that the partner would begin to communicate a Nishorgo Network set of materials on their own, and that these materials – prepared as they are outside of USAID funding – would not include USAID in the "banner position" in which it is included in the Network communications now.

Background: Summary of the Logic and Purpose of the "Nishorgo Network"

Nature Under Threat

Bangladesh is losing its remaining natural areas – haors, beels, rivers, other wetlands, forests and the coast. Wetland waters are being diverted and unpolluted waters and healthy native fish are ever harder to find. Forests are felled or converted to plantations, and the mystery we knew of the "jungle" and the animals in it fades from memory. These natural areas, and the wildlife in them, are threatened by encroachment, untreated effluents, unplanned construction and other changes. These habitats once provided a safety net for the poor living around them, even as they offered all citizens places of lasting beauty. When local communities used these natural areas to meet their basic needs, they remained abundant and productive. But as they are broken up and sold off for commercial use, the poor are getting poorer and the natural areas are dying.

A Collective Response

Communities and Government across the country – working through "co-management" organizations – are joining forces to reverse this trend. They are taking responsibility for protection of remaining forests and wetlands, and investing in restoration. And the Government – especially the Departments of Environment, Fisheries and Forestry – is helping communities, with pilot efforts at Ecologically Critical Areas, declared fish sanctuaries, National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and even RAMSAR sites. These efforts have led to one central lesson: Conservation and management of natural resources works best when communities are formally engaged by Government in the process.

The Nishorgo Network

The Nishorgo Network is an affiliated network of co-managed natural areas throughout Bangladesh. At Nishorgo Network areas, natural ecosystems are restored and collaboratively managed to become healthy and productive and in so doing create benefits for the people living nearby, and for the country as a whole. The Nishorgo Network exists for all of the citizens of Bangladesh, now and for future generations.

3 Common Features of Every Nishorgo Area

Regardless of which community groups or Government departments are supporting it, each Nishorgo area is:

• *Conservation-focused:* Some part of each Nishorgo area is left as a sanctuary to be protected from uncontrolled harvesting and conversion to other uses. The Network is thus rooted in a commitment to nature conservation.

• *Collaboratively-managed:* Nishorgo areas are managed through a formal collaboration between local communities and the Government. A co-management structure is formally recognized and supported by Government.

• *Pro-Poor:* Nishorgo areas, once conserved, create wealth through increasingly productive natural systems. At all Nishorgo areas, economic benefits associated with improved conservation are directed to meet the needs of the neighboring poor.

A Growing Affiliation of Network Areas

The Network now includes many such areas located throughout Bangladesh (see map). The Forest Department's Protected Areas are included, among them the National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries. Wetland Sanctuaries instituted by the Department of Fisheries within beels, haors and river systems are also included, as are those Ecologically Critical Areas (ECA) managed by communities with the Department of the Environment. Other similar areas may also join the Network.

Management of the Nishorgo Network

The Network is jointly managed by the three concerned government technical Departments, in close collaboration with the established co-management organizations looking after each Protected Area in the Network. At forest Protected Areas, "Co-Management Councils" form "Co-Management Committees" and a "People's Forum" allows a specific vehicle for the poor to be heard. Wetlands, community-based fisheries organizations are represented within "Resource Management Organizations", which are themselves affiliated with "Upazila Fisheries Organizations", including representatives of fisheries interests and the poor, as well as local elected and appointed government representatives. And at other community sites, new models are evolving. The formal models of co-management can vary, but all parts of the Network are co-managed by the citizens living in and around them together with representatives of the government. At the national level, oversight and coordination mechanisms are being developed. Those mechanisms will not directly manage Nishorgo areas, but rather provide support in the form of joint communication, quality control and guidance.

The Name "Nishorgo"

With so many pilot co-management efforts under way throughout the country, a group of interested conservationists proposed in 2009 to find a single name and image for the affiliated network of co-managed sites. Because students in general, and university students in particular, are so important to any movement in Bangladesh, a competition was launched to seek ideas for appropriate names from those students. In the first quarter

of 2010, hundreds of students at four public universities took part in separate foray to propose candidate names for a national conservation network. Many names emerged from that process, but none was more popular than "Nishorgo", which received the highest numbers of votes during the student meetings. The students recognized that "Nishorgo" implies a poetic and all-encompassing image of nature, one that includes land, water, sea and air.

Supporters of the Nishorgo Network

The Network is being supported by a range of public and private entities. The Government of Bangladesh's Ministry of Environment & Forests (Forest Department & Department of Environment) and Ministry of Fisheries & Livestock (Department of Fisheries) are providing a leading role under a number of official Government programs. Major initiatives include the Coastal Wetlands and Biodiversity Management Project (CWBMP) co-financed by GEF/UNDP, the Integrated Protected Areas Co-Management (IPAC) Project (co-financed by USAID), the Sundarbans Environment And Livelihood Support (SEALS) Project (co-financed by the European Union), the Community-Based Sustainable Management of Tanguor Haor Program (co-financed by the Swiss Development Corporation and IUCN/Bangladesh), the Chunati Participatory Forest Management Project and Pabna District Wetland Conservation project (both co-financed by GTZ) and other initiatives. Private entities supporting the Nishorgo Network include the Arannayk Foundation, the Bangladesh Scouts and a growing number of NGOs and private companies committed to the conservation cause.

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The Nishorgo Network receives support for coordination and advice from _____ (name partner institution here).

The Network has received Financial Support From: