



LEDARS Initiative on Mangrove Restoration and Conservation

Background:

The Sundarbans—the world’s largest mangrove forest, is a lifeline for millions of people living in southwest Bangladesh. This vast green ecosystem acts as a natural shield against cyclones, tidal surges, and coastal erosion, while also sustaining livelihoods through fishing, honey collection, agriculture, and forest-based resources.

Life in the Sundarbans landscape, however, is increasingly precarious. Frequent storms, rising salinity, and shrinking agricultural land force many men to migrate in search of work, leaving women—particularly tiger widows, indigenous Munda communities, and women-headed households—to bear disproportionate social and economic burdens. Heavy dependence on forest resources, combined with climate stress and limited livelihood alternatives, places both people and biodiversity at constant risk.

The Sundarbans serve as a protective wall against oceanic disasters and a critical source of livelihoods for coastal communities. Ensuring its long-term sustainability requires inclusive forest governance, effective co-management, and viable alternative livelihoods. While the Forest Department remains the primary authority responsible for conservation, existing management practices face significant challenges. Co-management approaches involving forest-dependent communities have been introduced, but these systems themselves require strengthening, coordination, and inclusive participation to become truly effective. In response to these challenges, LEDARS is implementing two projects in Sundarbans impact zone entitled, Blue Carbon Project funded by Meridian Institute and RESCUE Project funded by GIZ Bangladesh. Both projects are strengthening community-led conservation while securing sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable populations.

Goal: Empowering Sundarbans communities to protect their forest and secure their future.

Objectives

1. **Improved and Sustainable Livelihoods:** Communities in the Sundarbans landscape achieve higher and more sustainable incomes through enhanced skills, value addition, and improved access to markets.
2. **Inclusive and Equitable Resource Governance:** Women and marginalized groups gain greater influence in local planning and resource management, with their priorities increasingly reflected in decision-making processes.
3. **Gender-Responsive Biodiversity Conservation:** Local communities implement effective, gender-responsive initiatives that protect biodiversity and promote sustainable natural resource management.

Major Interventions

1. Community Mobilization & Institutional Capacity Development

The project aims to foster a supportive conservation ecosystem across the Sundarbans and its impact zone. It will establish 10 Resource User Groups and 10 Women's Groups, engaging highly vulnerable households—including tiger widows, Munda communities, and forest-dependent women-headed families—in conservation initiatives. Existing people's institutions such as Co-management Committees, Village Conservation Forums (VCFs), and Community Patrolling Groups will be strengthened through leadership and conservation-focused training. The project will also revitalize 10 VCFs and facilitate bi-monthly People's Forum meetings to ensure inclusive participation, stronger local governance, and community-led biodiversity conservation.

2. Scoping Study on Alternative Livelihoods

The project begins with a comprehensive scoping study to assess the realities, needs, and opportunities of Sundarbans-dependent communities. This includes identifying viable alternative livelihoods, mapping market linkages, and exploring engagement with financial institutions. Findings are validated through a multi-stakeholder workshop involving community representatives, government departments, financial institutions, and SMEs. The study provides evidence-based guidance for identifying conservation-friendly livelihoods, service providers, and sustainable income opportunities.

3. Creating Sustainable Livelihood Opportunities

To reduce pressure on forest resources, the project will provide capacity-building training for vulnerable households engaged in forest-dependent activities. Selected women and Sundarbans-dependent families will receive technical and financial support to initiate and scale income-generating enterprises. In

total, 200 women, including tiger widows and indigenous households, will be trained in improved livelihood options and linked with market opportunities.



4. Leadership Development for Effective Forest Management

The project will strengthen leadership within people's organizations to enhance their bargaining power and collaboration with the Forest Department, Union Parishads, NGOs, and other service providers. Training will cover climate change and resilience, gender-responsive development, community project planning, implementation and monitoring, and advocacy. These efforts will reinforce participatory forest governance and strengthen the overall management structure for Sundarbans conservation.



5. Strengthening Community-Led Climate Resilience

RESCUE will support climate-resilient agriculture, community-level rainwater management, climate-smart off-farm activities, and conservation initiatives. Three community rainwater harvesting systems will improve access to safe water, while at least 10 community-led initiatives—including mangrove afforestation, seed banks, eco-tourism development, and campaigns against single-use plastics—will enhance ecosystem resilience and biodiversity protection.

6. Mangrove Afforestation and Restoration

Mangrove afforestation plays a critical role in carbon sequestration and climate resilience. The project undertakes afforestation initiatives along embankments and degraded coastal areas, involving local communities in the process to ensure long-term

sustainability. Indigenous mangrove species are prioritized to restore biodiversity and enhance the carbon storage potential of these ecosystems. These efforts contribute significantly to balancing global temperatures by absorbing carbon dioxide while also providing vital protection against coastal erosion and storm surges.



7. Capacity Building for Blue Carbon Monitoring

To establish a locally rooted and sustainable monitoring system for blue carbon, the project invests in training citizen scientists and local NGO staff. These capacity-building efforts equip communities with the knowledge and tools necessary for effective blue carbon monitoring. Additionally, the project develops training modules and protocols for community-led management of blue carbon ecosystems and their integration into carbon markets. These initiatives ensure the active participation of local stakeholders in conserving and leveraging blue carbon resources.

8. Support for Alternative Livelihood

To reduce dependency on the Sundarbans and other fragile ecosystems, the project provides training and resources for alternative livelihoods such as aquaculture, ecotourism, and sustainable crafts. Beneficiaries are supported in developing small-scale enterprises that ensure economic sustainability while conserving the environment. These livelihood options not only improve the economic resilience of communities but also contribute to the sustainable use and preservation of blue carbon ecosystems.



9. Community Outreach and Awareness

The project will conduct extensive awareness activities targeting forest-dependent communities, particularly Munda households, tiger widows, and other high-risk groups.

Topics include sustainable forest management, environmental conservation, gender-responsive development, Locally Led Adaptation (LLA), and Nature-based Solutions (NbS). Support will be provided to local cultural groups to deliver impactful performances. Community meetings, youth-led campaigns, cultural events, people's assemblies, and advocacy dialogues will further strengthen public engagement and collective action.

Project Link:

1. Blue Carbon Project: [Promoting Blue Carbon – LEDARS](#)
2. RESCUE Project: [Resilient Ecosystems & Sustainable Communities to Uphold the Sundarbans Environment \(RESCUE\) – LEDARS](#)

For more information,



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