

Since early 80s Social Forestry has achieved special focus in Bangladesh forestry sector. It has brought a significant shift in forest management through bringing both the conservation of forest reserves and poverty reduction in development strategies. National policy papers viz. national forest policy 1994, forestry sector master plan 1993, The Forest (Amendment) Act 2000 and Social Forestry Rules 2004 unanimously put emphasis on people-oriented forestry programme. Many scholars and development practitioners also recognized the crucial role of local people in natural resources management (Marks, 1984; McCay and Acheson, 1987; Ostrom, 1990; Poffenberger, 1990; Hecht and Cockburn, 1990; UNFAO, 1990; Blockhus et al., 1992; Bromley et al., 1992; Ascher, 1995; Agarwal, 2000). Hence in pursuance of social forestry programme in Bangladesh, local level social forestry institutions like participants' groups, social forestry management committee (SFMC), tree farming fund committee, upazilla environment and forest development committee (UEFDC) were founded during early 90s. These institutions are playing vital role to implement Social Forestry (SF) programme in association with the existing local level FD institutions namely forest ranges and forest beats. On the other hand, Forest governance, as a recent development discourse, entails clarifying the relationships, rights, responsibilities and incentives among various actors on the direction and nature of forest uses in a sustainable way (Recoftc, 2005) and LIED (2005) views it as decisions and actions that remove the barriers and install the policy and institutional systems, which spread local forestry success.

The study focuses on the legal foundations and performance of the local level forestry institution, their compliance to the principles of good governance and overall implication of forest governance in sustainable forest management. This study is contextual to the social forestry programme in Sal forests of Bangladesh.

Study reveals that two local level social forestry institutions viz. social forestry management committee (SFMC) and upazilla environment and forest development committee (UEDFC) have the potentiality to ensure governance in forest management through collaboration of local forest dependent communities, local public agencies, NGOs, civil societies and forest department as legal custodian of forest reserves. At this point, these actors demonstrate a structured initiation in ensuring governance through

participation of a wide range of stakes, in a visible consensus manner, towards some set strategic visions, and effective mechanism of guaranteeing rule of law. The study also reveals that the committees display a positive drive through their efficiency, accountability and transparency in transactions with the stakeholders. However, there are some challenges yet to be resolved. These are selecting right and the most eligible local dependents as SF participants, building capacity of the rights holders and duty bearers, conflict resolution and devolution of financial and administrative power to these institutions. It is largely evident that FD as land owning agency and local elites (administrative and political) still play dominant role in SF programme implementations, which often impede ensuring good forest governance. Furthermore, though the tree farming fund (TFF) is acknowledged for sustainability of SF programme, the institutions in practice, are neither capable to handle the funds nor transparent in its transactions.

The study concludes with ranking the institutions in a gauge of 1-51, with respect to five principles of good governance (adopted from Graham et. al. 2003) and found that UDF,FC achieved an aggregate rank of 2.5 i.e. right in between good (2) and moderate (3) and the SFMC ranks at 2.69, i.e. closer to moderate (3). This implies that UEFDC's performance is better than the SFMC in ensuring good forest governance through the social forestry programme. Consequently, more emphasis should be given to make the SFMC more functional and effective since it paves the basis of SF programme as well as the most vital starting point towards ensuring forest governance. However, the progress so far achieved in the SF programme in the country is a reflection of external backstopping from donors, project supports and policy makers; and made the space for local actors to create demand for further refinement, update and improving social forestry to meet their needs as well as preserving biological diversity in the forest reserves.

Although the study exhibits a fragmented scenario of social forestry programme and localized in context, it may be a food for thought for the actors in social forestry programme and would be useful for directing further research by the academicians.

