

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Collaboration or Capture? Unpacking the Notion of Forest Governance in Madhupur and Lawachara Forests of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Co-management has widely been advocated as a means to address power imbalances in conservation, yet its implementation often reinforces existing inequalities rather than fostering equitable collaboration. However, this qualitative study, based on evidence from Madhupur and Lawachara forests in Bangladesh, demonstrates that the model functions more as a mechanism of control than genuine collaboration. Despite the rhetoric of community participation, the Forest Department (FD) retains authority by bypassing democratic processes—such as withholding support for local elections—and co-opting local elites to maintain its dominance. While a few forest users receive limited incentives, they lack decision-making power and face exclusion if they dissent. Institutions remain deliberately fragile and dependent on the FD, enabling the state and its allied elites to exploit marginalized communities through patronage networks and corrupt practices, including the strategic inclusion of forest offenders as defenders to maintain illicit control. This form of “administrative co-management” facilitates both elite and regulatory capture, undermining the intended objectives of equity and empowerment. The study recommends the establishment of robust regulatory frameworks with enforceable accountability mechanisms, meaningful decentralization with real devolution of power, and adequate livelihood support for forest-dependent communities. Embedding anti-corruption safeguards and ensuring transparency in co-management processes are essential for restoring trust and transforming forest governance from a tool of capture into one of genuine collaboration.

1 | Introduction

The global shift toward participatory environmental governance has positioned co-management as a leading paradigm for natural resource conservation, aiming to reconcile ecological protection with community empowerment through shared decision-making (Carlsson and Berkes 2005; Armitage et al. 2009). Co-management represents a compromise between state-centered conservation models and local autonomy, envisioning partnerships where governmental agencies and local

communities jointly manage resources (Berkes 2009). This model combines the state's regulatory capacity and scientific expertise with the local knowledge and interests of resource-dependent communities (Armitage et al. 2009). International organizations and governments have embraced it as an optimistic pathway to sustainable development, indigenous self-determination, and climate resilience (Natcher and Hickey 2002).

However, three decades of implementation reveal a paradox: co-management frameworks have proliferated globally, yet their

outcomes remain contested. Some argue co-management reconciles ecological and social objectives (Natcher and Hickey 2002; Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004; Jashimuddin et al. 2022), while critical scholarship shows many initiatives fail to strengthen community-based governance, reinforcing existing power asymmetries (Nadasdy 2010; Cooke and Kothari 2001). This gap is seen in the weakness of community-based components, where the state incorporates more officials in decision-making processes (Pitman et al. 2017; Ali et al. 2017) and co-opts elite individuals to fulfill state objectives (Mansuri and Rao 2004; Rana 2014; Cons 2021). These individuals are granted a variety of incentives, which enable them to act as agents of the government in the execution of its decisions (Castro and Nielsen 2001; Soliku and Schraml 2018)—perpetuating “participatory authoritarianism” (Ojha et al. 2016). Consequently, resources and opportunities of marginalized groups are systematically transferred to benefit the elite and their allies (Schmidt and Theesfeld 2012). This contradiction highlights a dilemma: do co-management systems truly devolve authority to locals or serve as legitimizing devices for centralized control—a form of “institutional mimicry” (Li 2007) that adopts collaborative language while preserving hierarchies? Resolving this tension requires analyzing how power is negotiated, resisted, and re-configured within co-management arrangements—the focus of this study.

Understanding co-management as a dynamic political process, rather than a fixed design, helps unpack this tension. As Clement et al. (2019) argue, co-management is shaped by ongoing negotiations between actors with unequal power and interests. The success—or failure—of participatory governance hinges not only on formal structures but also on how power is exercised, contested, and negotiated within those structures. Central to this debate is the concept of “capture”, revealing how participatory frameworks may be co-opted by bureaucracies, local elites, or corporate actors to serve their interests while marginalizing the communities they claim to empower (Wong 2010; Cons 2021).

This paper critically examines the tension between collaboration and capture in forest governance in Madhupur and Lawachara forests of Bangladesh. Both sites exemplify Bangladesh’s shift toward participatory conservation, with co-management structures intended to balance state oversight with community involvement. Drawing on empirical fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024, and institutional and policy analysis, this study explores whether co-management represents a genuine attempt at inclusive, community-based governance—or whether it has become a vehicle for state dominance and elite manipulation under a participatory veneer. By analyzing how power circulates through co-management institutions and how actors navigate, resist, or reproduce structural inequalities, the paper illuminates the broader political economy shaping forest governance in Bangladesh. This research contributes to the literature on environmental justice, decentralization, and conservation politics in the Global South. It interrogates the design of co-management institutions and their social, political, and ecological implications—asking: is co-management fostering democratic collaboration, or institutionalizing a new form of capture?

2 | The Concepts and Connotations of Co-Management and Capture

Co-management, distributing responsibilities, rights, and obligations between the state and local communities, aligns conservation efforts with community development (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2007; Berkes et al. 1991, 12). It empowers participants, ensuring their voices are heard, knowledge valued, and interests addressed equitably (Castro and Nielsen 2001; Agarwal 2010). In co-management, states and communities often seek to maximize their share, influence resource planning, and shift costs to the other party (Singleton 2000; Spaeder and Feit 2005). Without such empowerment, Nadasdy (2003) warns that co-management risks becoming ‘colonialism by another name,’ where state involvement dominates local interests while maintaining an illusion of participation. This dynamic often legitimizes state control through symbolic inclusion while maintaining bureaucratic constraints on community agency.

The transition from theoretical ideals to practical implementation necessitates addressing three fundamental conditions. First, substantive participation must extend beyond superficial consultation to meaningful community engagement (Arnstein 1969). Second, equitable distribution of conservation burdens and benefits must be institutionalized, including material gains and decision-making authority (Agarwal 2010). It is critical to ensure that the benefits outweigh the costs (Napier et al. 2005; Ma et al. 2023). Third, institutional safeguards are essential to prevent elite domination and maintain accountability (Platteau 2004; Singleton 2000). Cooperation is challenging when a single actor group significantly influences state actors (Singleton 2000).

It is obvious that state and community managers require bureaucratic discretion or flexibility to collaborate and promote social trust, prevent community exploitation, address minor transgressions, and enforce regulations through cooperation by prioritizing community well-being (Singleton 2000). This approach emphasizes institutional roles and changes while focusing on immediate gains and sustained output (Pinkerton 2019; Napier et al. 2005). Comprehensive management systems promote trust and collaboration (Fox et al. 2013), facilitating alliances among states and communities, even with private interests (Singleton 2000). Both parties require adequate resources to meet responsibilities and resist capture (Singleton 2000). In developing nations, local communities face challenges fulfilling daily requirements, restricting their capacity to conserve resources. Ensuring sustainable livelihoods through alternative income opportunities alongside forest conservation is essential (Subroto et al. 2017).

“Capture” is a comprehensive concept used to analyze predatory spatial methods that employ force or stratagem to gain control of something for various reasons (Cons 2021). Capture is essential in frontier regions where bureaucrats, officials, and regulated interests are closely related, public interests remain ambiguous, and citizen influence in policymaking is minimal. Environmental governance experiences capture through three pathways: bureaucratic capture, with state

agencies exerting control via approval processes and funding (Sahide et al. 2020; Alam and Teicher 2012); elite capture, where local powerholders dominate decision-making and benefits (Mansuri and Rao 2013; Rana 2014); and corporate capture, where business interests influence management agendas through partnerships (Leach et al. 2010). It manifests itself in various ways, transforming forests and their organizations. Recently, the term “state capture,” introduced by Hellman et al. (2000), has been used to refer to a form of systematic corruption wherein external entities improperly influence government institutions for their private interests (Dávid-Barrett 2023; Pešić 2007), ultimately compromising public welfare and democracy (Madonsela 2019). In developing countries, this manifests through patronage networks and corruption, with political elites utilizing state machinery for personal or political advantage (Waheduzzaman et al. 2018; Khan 2001). According to Hellman et al. (2000) and Yakovlev and Zhuravskaya (2006), it comprises four features: (i) legal actors engage in corruption; (ii) primarily economic in origin and consequences; (iii) primarily through bribery; (iv) primarily targeting the legislative branch. Corruption enables political party leaders to seize state functions, obstructing democratic transition (Li and Wright 2023). These dynamics function under participatory rhetoric, reinforcing “decentralization in disguise” (Ribot et al. 2006).

The persistence of capture reflects structural inequities embedded in co-management systems. First, inherent power asymmetries favor states, which enter partnerships with superior financial, technical, and legal resources (Nadasdy 2010). Second, existing social hierarchies—particularly along gender, class, and ethnic lines—constrain meaningful participation (Agarwal 2010; Li 2007). Third, neoliberal governance frameworks privilege economically powerful actors, marginalizing resource-dependent communities (Fletcher 2010). Together, these factors enable what Cooke and Kothari (2001) critique as “tyrannies of participation,” where inclusive rhetoric masks continued exclusion.

2.1 | Setting the Scene

The evolution of forest co-management in Bangladesh presents a complex and often contested picture of collaboration, state control, and community agency. Framed as a participatory model of forest governance, co-management was first introduced in 1998 through the Management of Aquatic Resources through Community Husbandry (MACH) project, emphasizing decentralized wetland governance with community stewardship at its core (Fox et al. 2013). This initiative laid the groundwork for similar experiments in forested landscapes, most notably through the Nishorgo Support Project (NSP) in 2004, which piloted co-management in five forest Protected Areas (PAs)—including Lawachara National Park—with the stated goal of conserving biodiversity while empowering local stakeholders (Uddin and Parr 2018).

Over the next two decades, co-management expanded through successive donor-funded interventions such as Integrated Protected Area Co-management in 2008 and Climate Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods from 2013 to 2018. These programs

sought to institutionalize power-sharing between the Forest Department (FD) and communities across 23 forest PAs. As of 2024, 23 out of 49 forest PAs are managed under co-management arrangements through 28 local organizations (BFD 2024). However, these initiatives also deepened questions about the nature of power devolution, accountability, and equity in forest governance.

Madhupur and Lawachara, the two focal sites of this study, exemplify these tensions. In Madhupur, co-management has intersected with long-standing conflicts between the state and indigenous Garo communities, whose claims to ancestral land and forest use have been historically marginalized. In 2009, the FD launched the Re-vegetation of Madhupur Forests through Rehabilitation of Forest Dependent Local and Ethnic Communities project, targeting so-called forest “offenders” and marginalized users. This initiative provided alternative livelihoods, training, and temporary employment as Community Forest Workers (CFWs) (known as CPG community patrol guards in other areas), with the aim of steering communities away from resource extraction and toward conservation roles (Islam and Sato 2013; Kabir et al. 2021). However, this rehabilitation effort was selective, often excluding broader community interests and failing to fully integrate customary governance systems.

Similarly, in Lawachara National Park—inhabited predominantly by the Khasia and Tripura indigenous communities—co-management arrangements have encountered persistent challenges in aligning conservation objectives with the socioeconomic realities of forest-dependent populations. Without evaluating offenders’ performance in MNP, engagement of forest offenders was replicated here. Although institutional frameworks such as Co-management Committees (CMCs) and People’s Forums were established to facilitate participatory governance, these structures have often fallen short of genuinely devolving authority. Instead, they have tended to reinforce hierarchical governance, with the FD retaining significant decision-making power, including veto authority over critical actions (Uddin and Parr 2018). Moreover, the co-management process has been critiqued for being susceptible to elite capture, donor-driven agendas, and bureaucratic dominance, which collectively hinder equitable participation and marginalize less powerful stakeholders (Fox et al. 2013; Uddin and Parr 2018). Furthermore, the implementation of Alternative Income Generating (AIG) initiatives—intended to reduce forest dependency—has frequently been misaligned with local needs and aspirations, thereby limiting their effectiveness in fostering sustainable livelihood transitions (BFD 2024).

Thus, the trajectory of co-management in Bangladesh—particularly in Madhupur and Lawachara—raises critical questions about whether these mechanisms truly reflect collaborative governance or if they function as instruments of state control and donor-driven conservation. This study examines these sites not only as policy experiments but as contested spaces where institutional power, local resistance, and negotiated livelihoods shape the meaning and practice of forest governance as co-management prioritizes “managing relationships” (Natcher et al. 2005).

Study Area

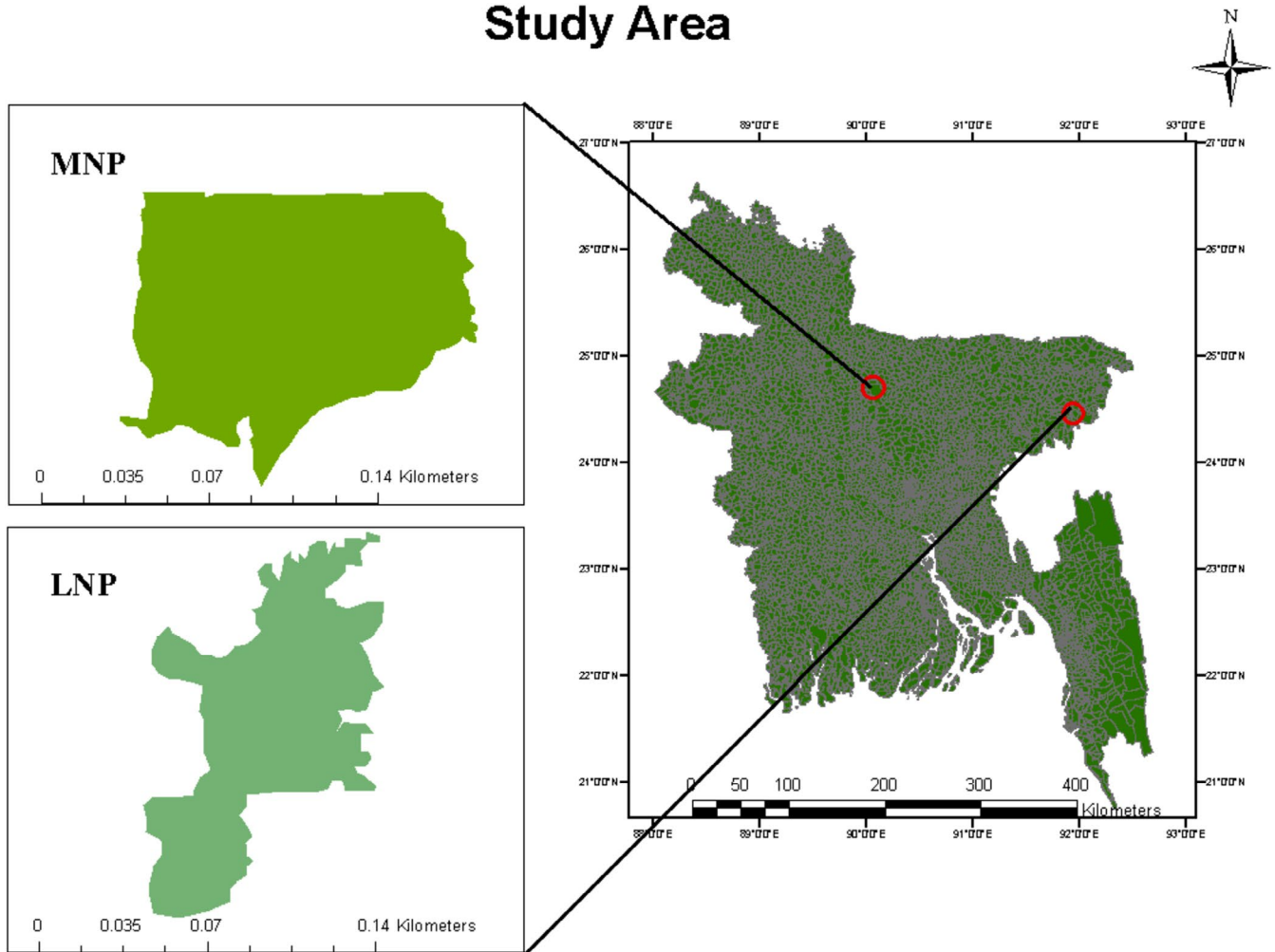


FIGURE 1 | Location of study areas.

3 | Methodological Considerations

3.1 | Description of the Study Sites

The study was conducted in two different forest ecosystems: the deciduous sal forest in Madhupur, Tangail, and the semi-evergreen hill forest in Lawachara, Moulavibazar, where co-management practices are in effect (Figure 1). The Madhupur Sal forest, originally encompassing 25,495.96 ha in 1982, has now diminished to less than 8000 ha (Islam et al. 2013). The Lawachara forest cover increased from 726 ha in 1998 to 903 ha in 2008 as a result of afforestation efforts in degraded regions. Nonetheless, this percentage increase was not sustained, resulting in a reduction of 884 ha in 2018 (Masum et al. 2023). However, it is noteworthy that the condition of forest cover has deteriorated due to deforestation, occurring at an annual rate of 0.21%, alongside an increase in settlement at a yearly rate of 4.26% within the Lawachara National Park during the co-management period (Masum et al. 2023). Madhupur is characterized by tropical moist deciduous forest, primarily dominated by *Shorea robusta* (Sal) (Islam and Sato 2012a), whereas Lawachara is part of the evergreen and semi-evergreen forest zone in northeastern Bangladesh, featuring a dense canopy with a diverse understory of medicinal plants, contributing to its rich biodiversity and

endemic species (Mukul et al. 2014; Ahammed et al. 2023). Both forests, despite their ecological differences, exhibit significant human-forest interactions and contested governance.

The populations residing in and around these forests comprise both ethnic minorities—such as the Garo and Koch in Madhupur (Kabir et al. 2020), and the Khasia, Tripura, and Manipuri in Lawachara (Islam and Uddin 2013)—and Bengali settlers, many of whom migrated following state-sponsored land settlement programs (Mukul et al. 2014; Kabir et al. 2020). Indigenous communities have deep cultural ties to forests, coexisting with Bengali settlers who relocated during state-led agricultural expansion (Rashid et al. 2013; Chowdhury et al. 2022; Islam and Sato 2012b).

Across both sites, communities experience widespread financial hardship and maintain a high level of dependency on forest resources to sustain their livelihoods. Most households rely on forests for fuelwood, medicinal plants, NTFPs, and agricultural inputs (Rashid et al. 2013; Kabir et al. 2020). Indigenous communities practice jhum and forest-based agroforestry (Rasul and Thapa 2003; Islam and Nath 2014), while settlers engage in small-scale farming and NTFP collection (Nath and Inoue 2008; Chowdhury and Koike 2010).

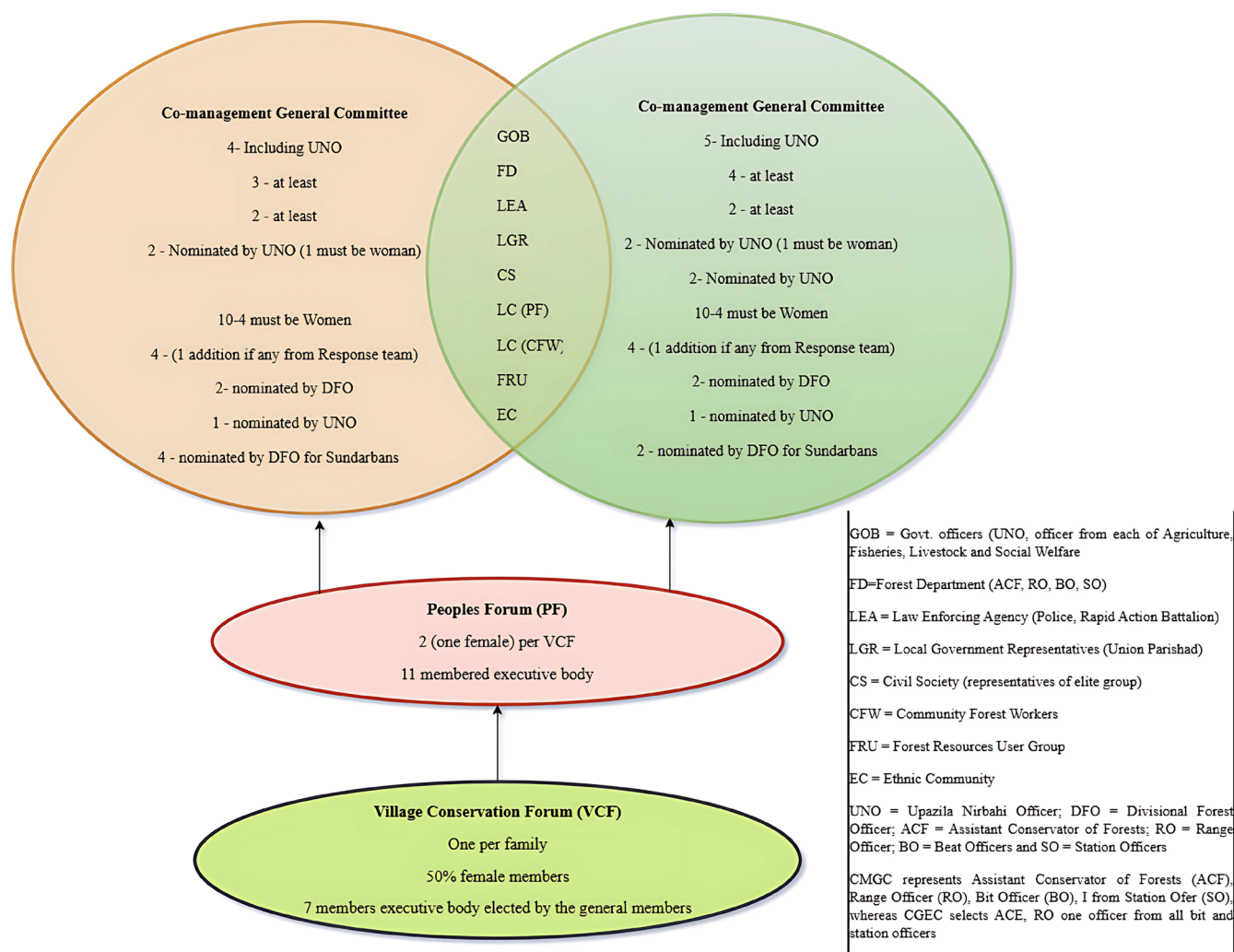


FIGURE 2 | Co-management structure based on Protected Area Rules-2017.

This shared vulnerability leads to cooperation and conflict over resource access. Ethnic communities emphasize customary rights, while settlers rely on formal permits, creating tensions worsened by conservation policies (Mukul et al. 2016; Chowdhury et al. 2024). Both groups report declining resource availability due to deforestation and regulations, necessitating adaptive strategies like seasonal wage labor across Indigenous and settler households (Kabir et al. 2020; Chowdhury et al. 2022).

3.2 | A Brief Overview on Co-Management in Practice¹

A three-tier structure—comprising co-management committees (executive and general), people forums, and village conservation forums (VCFs)—facilitates local engagement (Figure 2). VCFs form the co-management base, integrating resource users and impoverished adjacent populations. However, observations reveal that the local population is insufficiently informed regarding the VCF, its function, and its governance processes. Though VCF is mandated to select Community Patrol Group (CPG), also known as community Forest Workers (CFW) and PF members (two per

VCF, including one female) from the user's group, these individuals are chosen by the FD in collaboration with the NGOs responsible for implementing co-management. Range officers can appoint PF members in absence of elections. Most individuals are unaware of the resource user's situation and do not rely on forest resources. The executive committee, known as the “guardian of the forest,” is responsible for conserving forests, developing alternative livelihoods, and ensuring the welfare of forest and forest people.

In contrast, the committee can hold general meetings on relevant issues and make soft recommendations. CMC members (including CMGC and CMEC) are appointed by the FD and Upazila administration from PF and CFWs. Despite each member being allocated a two-year tenure, we saw that the time limitations for each committee have long since expired. Still, local forest user groups can only establish sustainable livelihoods after sanctioned use due to the absence of defined property rights (Roy et al. 2012).

3.3 | Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by a political ecology perspective, which emphasizes the power

dynamics, institutional arrangements, and historical contexts that shape human-environment relationships. The political ecology approach is particularly relevant in understanding co-management of forests in Bangladesh, where governance practices are embedded in layers of institutional legacy, socio-political inequality, and community resistance (Forsyth 2003; Rasul 2007). By exploring diverse and often conflicting perspectives of actors involved in or excluded from forest co-management institutions, the study aims to uncover the underlying structures that mediate forest access, benefit sharing, and decision-making.

3.4 | Data Collection Methods

A comprehensive review of major official documents, including reports, journals, and policies implemented by the Bangladesh Forest Department, hereafter referred to as the FD. The assessment aimed to understand the fundamental structure, rules, and regulations governing the co-management of the sites under study.

Data were collected between September 2022 and January 2023 through a combination of key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), informal conversational interviews, and content analysis of official documents and reports. This triangulated approach was designed to capture a wide range of perspectives and enhance the study's interpretive credibility (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004). In total, 82 participants were engaged across the study: 18 individuals through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) (9 per forest site), comprising three Co-Management Committee (CMC) members, three Forest Department (FD) officials, two excluded community members, and one local NGO representative per site. Additionally, 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted (six per forest site), involving 64 participants (averaging 5–6 per FGD). These discussions included two gender-segregated groups, two ethnic-specific discussions, and two mixed-stakeholder sessions per site. FGDs examined gendered and ethnic disparities in co-management perception and implementation. Mixed-stakeholder sessions promoted dialogue among community members, CMC leaders, Forest Department officials, and NGOs, offering a comprehensive perspective on co-management in Madhupur and Lawachara forests. Integrating KIIs and FGDs provided a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and political dynamics influencing forest governance in these regions. The interviews were conversational (West et al. 2018; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), allowing participants to share experiences, concerns, and views in a relaxed setting.

KIIs, who were members of the co-management team, were interviewed for 45 min regarding their sociodemographic characteristics, the process by which they became members of the co-management team, the transparency and accountability of the decision-making process and financial operations, the sufficiency of the support they received to maintain their livelihoods, and how together they worked to meet their stated objectives. KIIs, who were not part of the team, faced inquiries concerning the rationale behind their exclusion, the criteria employed for member selection, the extent of their deprivation, and the evaluation of the overall efficacy of the co-management endeavor. Following

the KIIs, focus groups were convened to better understand indigenous communities' perspectives in forest co-management and how they all cooperate to attain co-management objectives. The FGD participants were carefully picked since we were looking for features that could impact co-management opinions and were queried regarding their perspectives on co-management, the level of cooperation they had received, perceived limitations, and recommendations for further improvement.

A combination of purposive expert sampling (Atmadja and Sills 2017) and snowball sampling was used to identify participants with relevant knowledge of co-management practices. The sample was drawn from across the entire geographical extent of both forests, including core zones and buffer areas. Forest dependency (e.g., fuelwood, NTFP collection, small-scale agriculture) and membership status in co-management institutions (e.g., Community Management Committees, community patrol groups) were used as key selection criteria. Additionally, ethnic and cultural diversity was considered essential, ensuring the inclusion of Garo, Koch, Khasia, Tripura, and Bengali settler communities, whose relationships with the forest vary widely due to differences in tenure history, livelihood strategies, and access to decision-making (Mukul et al. 2014; Kabir et al. 2020).

The primary author, an academic with prior field experience in the studied sites, conducted all interviews and facilitated FGDs. Established relationships with residents and local authorities enabled access to informal knowledge and enhanced trust, particularly in discussing sensitive issues like elite capture, exclusion, and gender dynamics in co-management structures. This embeddedness also contributed to the interpretive depth of the study and the reflexivity in analyzing data.

All participant identities were kept anonymous to ensure confidentiality. Participants were informed of the research objectives and their right to withdraw at any stage. Gender-sensitive practices were maintained throughout the study, particularly in facilitating women's participation and creating safe spaces for dialogue.

3.5 | Data Analysis

The study employed a hybrid analytical approach combining content analysis and narrative analysis to systematically examine qualitative data. Transcripts from interviews and FGDs were processed using NVivo 12 for initial coding, supplemented by manual thematic coding to ensure nuanced interpretation (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). Through iterative cycles of open coding (identifying emergent concepts), axial coding (establishing relationships between codes), and selective coding (refining core themes), we developed a structured framework capturing key patterns in co-management dynamics (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Narrative analysis further contextualized participant accounts, revealing how institutional power, historical marginalization, and livelihood dependencies shape forest governance experiences (Riessman 2008; Czarniawska 2004). This dual approach facilitated robust theme development while preserving the depth of stakeholder perspectives and the sociopolitical embeddedness of their narratives (Clandinin and Connelly 2004; Patton 2015).

4 | Result

4.1 | Socio-Demographic Particulars

Agriculture is the primary livelihood in the Madhupur region, involving around 60% of the population. Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) collection constitutes 25% of income sources, while daily wage labor represents 15%. The literacy rate among agroforestry farmers in Madhupur Garh is 34%, below the district's average of 47.8%. Forest dependency is notable, with 71% of households relying on fuelwood, 23% gathering medicinal plants, and 18% participating in small-scale, illegal timber extraction. At Lawachara National Park, 45% of the population relies on agroforestry for their livelihood, mostly through betel-leaf production, especially in the Khasia ethnic group. Ecotourism-related employment generates income for 20% of the population. NTFP collection supports 35% of the population's livelihoods. Educational attainment stands at 31%, hindering income diversification. Both areas exhibited a monthly income range between 10,000 and 15,000 taka (800 to 1200 USD).

4.2 | Bureaucratic Dominance in Co-Management Institution

The co-management operates through three-tier institutions, the Co-management Executive Committee (CMEC) and the Co-management General Committee (CMGC) are at the higher tier, Peoples Forum (PF) in the mid, and Village Common Forum (VCF) at the base, based on the latest PA Management Rules 2017 (BFD 2024). Despite having 10 (48%) and 17 (53%) local members (PF and CPF) in the CMEC and CMGC, respectively, these representatives fail to adequately represent the community due to gratitude or fear of losing their membership before senior officials and their patrons. Women make up between 24% and 16% of the CMEC. Most CMC members, selected by the FD in consultation with local elites and higher-level upazila administration, avoid articulating community demands to senior officials out of appreciation or fear of losing their support. As a result, the CMC institute implements conservation-oriented management without considering the local population's sustainability. One of the CMC members, X₁, of the local community stated that

The Upazilla chairman and UNO are primary figures at CMC meetings with limited time to hear us. Locals lack the courage to engage due to lack of education and devolutionary power. Therefore, they implemented the co-management prioritizing conservation, as directed by the government/FD, and provided us with some insufficient benefits.

During a CMEC meeting in LNP, it was observed that only the DFO, range officers, and two distinguished individuals engaged in discussions about forest protection, leading to a final decision by the UNO. A local user attempted to express concerns about how this situation would impact their livelihood, but lower-level FD officials signaled for him to stop, and ultimately, no one acknowledged his worries. A similar experience was noted during a local meeting at the MNP range office, where the voices of the locals were overlooked, and the majority of the speeches were

delivered by the range officer of the forest department, along with a few from local elites.

4.3 | Forest Department Dominance in Co-Management

Despite the intended shift toward participatory governance, co-management in Bangladesh remains largely controlled by the Forest Department (FD). Though PA rules (2017) mandated CMC to make an Annual Development Plan (ADP), it requires DFO's approval to be effective. Additionally, in the absence of regular elections, the range officers of the concerned FD are empowered to select members of the People's Forum (PF). Locals claimed no support from FD to hold elections to maintain their control on co-management decisions. One of the local forest users, X₂, of MNP areas stated with grief that

The FD selects forest offenders without consulting us, even the CMC members. Despite the expiration of the time duration for selected members, replacements have not been made. They dominate in the ADP too, saying we lack 'technical skills.' So, where are we in co-management—apart from our roles as laborers in plantations and our efforts to safeguard forests?

4.4 | Elite Captured Governance

Co-management, a top-down approach, was attempted to be executed with local assistance and foreign donor support. The implementing agency, in consultation with FD, selects influential elites to execute the project. To demonstrate the initiative as a community-oriented strategy, the implementing agency actively engages residents regarding their expectations, most of whom have established ties with elites. This is done by providing maximum benefits to elites and ensuring that all community members feel involved and valued. According to one of the FD officials, X₃,

Effective project implementation requires the active involvement of influential individuals. Otherwise, safeguarding the preservation of the current forest becomes challenging. Poor individuals are occupied with making meals for their families and have limited time to allocate toward others.

Another FD official, X₄, added

You cannot ignore the social structure when implementing a project. Locals often lack knowledge and understanding of project goals, whereas community leaders are educated and wealthy. Engaging those helps earn residents' trust in the program.

Supporting impoverished farmers requires an effort that implementers are unwilling to undertake, as they must demonstrate effectiveness quickly. Educated elites are easily persuaded if

benefits favor them, leading to elite hegemony. Hence, another FD official, X₅, stated that

If one needs to apply oil to their hair, it is advisable to choose someone who already has oil on their hair, as they would need a lesser amount of oil.

4.5 | Client-Patron Relationship Prevails in Co-Management

The study reveals how entrenched client-patron relationships undermine the participatory goals of co-management systems. Survey data demonstrates that most local forest users lack the time, education, or confidence to engage directly with Forest Department officials, as they prioritize immediate subsistence needs over institutional participation. This vacuum is filled by local patrons—typically educated elites or CMC leaders—who leverage their social capital and available time to interface with authorities. These intermediaries secure project benefits like seeds, training programs, and cash-for-work opportunities, but redistribute them selectively to maintain political support networks. The system creates perverse incentives, with patrons receiving 3–5 times greater benefits than end-users. One of the local forest users, X₆, remarked in an FGD.

Government initiatives necessitate connections, as the saying goes—You need a ladder to climb a tree. Otherwise, your request will be ignored. We hesitate to converse with high-ranking officials directly, so we approach the FD via local leaders to ensure that our voice is heard and that we are included as beneficiaries.

Another local offender, X₇, mentioned that

You will often find several plots are allotted to elite people whereas we (landless) on the other hand leased those plots and borrowed money from them to cultivate the grounds and emergencies. You can't fight a crocodile while in the water.

Our field investigation uncovered a troubling lack of transparency in the land allocation process. Certain plots are assigned to a single family, such as siblings, children, and nephews. Even though the members of the co-managed team (primarily CMC) are purportedly elected for a two-year term, they are selected by the NGOs and FD of the time and continue to work beyond the expiration of their term, without any questions being raised. This lack of accountability is a cause for concern.

4.6 | State-Led Conservation Marginalizes Customary Rights

Field findings from Madhupur and Lawachara reveal that conservation efforts frequently prioritize forest protection over the customary access and use rights of local communities. In both areas, restrictions on forest entry, collection of forest resources,

and traditional land use practices, particularly to park areas, have intensified under conservation-driven management. Even some ethnic communities were evicted from ancestral lands to form parks. Despite co-management rhetoric, Garo access to NTFPs (e.g., medicinal plants, fuelwoods) remains criminalized. One Garo woman, X₈, stated

They call it conservation, but for us, it feels like eviction. This has been our land for generations, and now it's labeled a “protected area”—we're no longer allowed to enter or carry out our traditional subsistence activities.

In Lawachara, conservation policies prioritize wildlife habitats over Indigenous Khasia betel leaf agroforestry, a centuries-old livelihood. One of the Khasia elder, X₉, stated with sarcasm that

We cultivate betel leaf and some minor agriculture inside the forest over centuries. The FD is now limiting our practice to a certain area and applying restrictions not to clear branches, saying that our activity is disturbing the wildlife. What about the mass tourism in LNP? Is it not disturbing wildlife? So, why we targeted?

4.7 | Insufficient Support to Make Local Poor Loyal to Co-Management

Most of the forest beneficiaries relate that the forest department first set lofty goals and aspirations but provided little assistance to match their reliance on the initiative. One CMC member of MNP areas, X₁₀, stated that

At the initiation phase, FD promised to help us generate alternative income by offering support and techniques for our independence. They offered training and 11,000 BDT to start our entrepreneurship. Is it feasible to initiate a project with this modest sum? Therefore, it did nothing for us, and we relied on forests.

A woman reliant on forest resources in LNP areas, X₁₁, articulated that,

To initiate a project, we require low-interest credit support. We were unable to obtain bank credit because the government owns the land. It seems similar to preparing a soldier and then deploying him into combat without any weapons.

Regarding compensation, a CFW of LNP, X₁₂, expressed his frustration saying

You wish to safeguard the forest while we starve. We patrol with forest guards and take similar risks, yet our compensation is less than the daily labor wage (2.5\$ per duty). How can we sustain a family with this

in this high-priced market? What else will I do but steal from the forest?

Ecotourism is often cited as a primary revenue source for communities, with CMCs supposed to receive 50% of ecotourism and concession fees and 100% of NTFP extraction fees under the PA Rules, 2017. However, FD paused this revenue-sharing provision (except LNP) since DFOs faced sanctions if government audits of CMC funds were unclear (USAID 2019). The FD established a review committee to scrutinize the financial responsibilities of the PA Management Rules 2017, questioning why the DFO should be liable for CMC fund allocation. The committee recommends distributing revenue shares to the Divisional Forest Officer, increasing FD control over the CMC, and weakening the co-management relationship. A forest villager of MNP, X_{13} , noted,

FD informed us that they would enhance tourism potential with a significant development project and allocate a portion of the revenue to our development. However, there has been no substantial progress, and revenue sharing has been halted (LNP is an exception). The failure to cover our CMC operating expenses has made community development an unattainable aspiration.

The mindset of the state institution can be judged by the statement given by a low-ranked FD official, X_{14} , during the informal meeting:

If a dog is fed a full stomach, it will fall asleep; however, if it is fed half a stomach, it will obey your commands and follow you.

4.8 | Capture by Corruption

Lower-ranking corrupt officials capture destitute villagers to obtain excessive profits, allowing the illicit trade of small-scale forest products. They engage in this behavior either to relocate to a more advantageous location (where there is a higher probability of illegal earnings) by offering bribes or due to limited prospects of advancement, limited enforcement support, and political interference. One of the FD officials, X_{15} , justifies his corruption by saying

Engaging in unethical activities is a must due to political interference; otherwise, a transfer is inevitable. Why do we abstain from accepting money if we must engage in unethical activities due to political pressure?

On the other hand, the local elites and high-ranking foresters in the timber trade/land grabbing establish strong bonds of trust for extra-legal exchange and employ impoverished locals as labor to complete this work. As a result, local residents occasionally encounter legal proceedings while the primary perpetrator remains away from the scene. One of the ex-offenders of MNP, X_{16} , stated that

We cut trees from the forest (only) when receive green signals from our patrons and FD. It is (impossible) to take away anything from the forest without their concern. Nevertheless, the most egregious offenders, who derive tremendous profits from our illegal activities, remain behind the scenes while we, the impoverished laborers, are subjected to legal charges.

One of the offenders of the LNP, X_{17} , who faced several cases, after the initiative stated that

You know, why we are in the program? As we have cases against us, we can say nothing against their (FD's) corruption. If any of us [raised] his voice, he has to face legal prosecution like me. So, engaging criminals facilitates and safeguard FD's corruption.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with local residents have revealed significant concerns regarding the Forest Department's (FD) co-management practices. Many participants perceive that the FD's inclusion of certain individuals in forest protection roles serves as a facade to perpetuate corruption and exploit resources for personal gain. Most respondents from MNP areas asserted that the rehabilitation program for forest offenders, which emphasizes incentives over punishment, serves primarily as a facade for their syndicate.

4.9 | Politics and Politicization

As field observations indicate, co-management institutions are progressively gaining prominence and visibility in local contexts. Consequently, these institutions have attracted the attention of local power holders, including sociopolitical elites, as potential support bases and "vote banks." CMC members are affiliated with or directly connected to the ruling political parties. Utilizing their political influence, CMC leaders have attempted to advocate and negotiate with FD officials on behalf of forest offenders and illicit loggers.

5 | Discussion

Forest co-management, in theory, is designed to foster collaboration between the state and local communities, ensuring sustainable resource use while empowering marginalized groups (Singleton 2000). However, evidence from Madhupur and Lawachara forests reveals a starkly different reality—one where governance structures are systematically captured by elites and state actors, reinforcing existing power asymmetries rather than dismantling them (Gain 2023; Mollick et al. 2018; Sarker et al. 2017). Despite regulatory frameworks such as CMC, which are designed to decentralize authority, high-ranking officials manipulate these systems to prioritize global conservation agendas at the expense of local livelihoods (Siddique et al. 2023; Thoms 2008). This aligns with what KimDung et al. (2013) term "administrative co-management," where state agencies retain control under the guise of participatory governance, marginalizing forest-dependent

communities in the process (Soliku and Schraml 2018; Castro and Nielsen 2001). Similar findings were made by Fox et al. (2013), who contend that the co-management committee operated per the framework and standards established by FD in Bangladesh.

The bureaucratic design of co-management further entrenches this capture. Requirements such as Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) approval for CMC plans restrict local autonomy, mirroring failures observed in India and Africa where similar models have disenfranchised communities (Ballabh et al. 2002; Nunan et al. 2015). The biased selection of CMC members by Forest Department officials, in the absence of democratic elections, exemplifies their control over co-management institutions. By withholding support for holding elections, the FD strategically maintains dominance and avoids power-sharing with local stakeholders. In Bangladesh, this dynamic is exacerbated by entrenched patronage networks, where local elites—often with political and economic ties to state actors—act as gatekeepers of resources (Khan 2001; Islam et al. 2013). Studies in Madhupur and Lawachara corroborate findings from Rana (2014) and Baten (2024), showing how elites leverage their influence to monopolize benefits from forest projects, while the poor are relegated to labor roles or excluded entirely (Mansuri and Rao 2013). As Nightingale (2003) argues, community forests become sites “where entrenched social and power relations and cultural practices are constituted, struggled over and (re)produced” (p. 532).

Elite capture is not merely opportunistic but also structurally facilitated. Initial participation of elites in co-management committees generates an illusion of involvement, enabling officials to circumvent authentic community engagement (Schmidt and Theesfeld 2012). Forest departments (FD) facing resource constraints depend on elite stakeholders to accelerate decision-making processes, often marginalizing voices from underrepresented groups who lack the time and resources to engage (Paudyal et al. 2006; Banjade et al. 2006). Local elites serve as patrons and significantly influence decision-making processes by controlling access to government resources and acting as intermediaries between villagers and external authorities (Waheduzzaman et al. 2018; Khan 2001; Liverman 2004). Patronage relationships enable elites to allocate government resources to their allies, thereby consolidating power within the local community, frequently to the detriment of marginalized groups (Khan 2001). Co-management structures, in this context, serve as venues for elite consolidation rather than promoting equitable governance (Pulhin and Dressler 2009; Sahide et al. 2016; Ojha et al. 2016). This selective acquisition of governance roles is demonstrated in research conducted by Mansuri and Rao (2004) and Shapland et al. (2021), which document analogous patterns of elite dominance in co-management systems throughout the Global South.

Corruption further entrenches elite capture in the forest governance system (Robbins 2000). Our study reveals that local elites and FD officials engage in corrupt practices, including bribery and land grabbing, to maintain control over forest resources and political influence. These illegal activities not only deprive local populations of their rightful share of resources but also contribute to a system of “regulatory

capture” (Carpenter and Moss 2014; Nunan et al. 2018), where officials and elites exploit governance frameworks for personal gain. This corrupt relationship is often facilitated by the mutual trust and shared interests between elites and FD officials, further consolidating their power and control over forest resources (Mrema 2017; Islam and Sato 2012b). As corruption becomes normalized within the governance system, it perpetuates a cycle of inequality, where the most vulnerable members of society bear the brunt of exclusion and exploitation (De Graaf and Huberts 2008; Stephenson 2020). In Madhupur and Lawachara, this capture is institutionalized. Corruption becomes normalized (Stephenson 2020), and participatory spaces morph into arenas for elite domination (Nightingale 2003) rather than equal partners (Mabee and Hoberg 2006). The FD’s portrayal of locals as “threats” to conservation (KimDung et al. 2013) further legitimizes exclusion, while political patronage shields illegal logging by connected actors (Etiegni et al. 2017). Such dynamics reflect broader patterns observed in South Asia, where decentralization often recentralizes power (Pulhin and Dressler 2009; Sahide et al. 2016).

The state’s failure to prioritize the needs of local communities exacerbates these dynamics. Marginalized groups, denied equitable benefits, resort to illicit resource extraction, only to be criminalized or coerced into dependence on elite patronage (Khan 2001; Cooke and Kothari 2001). Despite the introduction of community-based programs and initiatives, the lack of financial support and infrastructure for sustainable livelihoods undermines the potential for effective collaboration. Local populations involved in forest patrols or awareness-raising campaigns are poorly compensated, and the lack of resources or credit to implement training effectively renders such initiatives futile (Edmonds 2002; Shrivastava 2006; Kabir et al. 2019). This economic disenfranchisement leads to a reliance on client-patron relationships with local elites, who provide material support in exchange for loyalty and continued participation in state-driven projects (Khan 2001; Baker 2018). This aligns with Mahanty et al.’s (2006) assertion that co-management prioritizes conservation “supply” over poverty alleviation, culminating in what Fazekas and Tóth (2016) term “state capture”—a systemic hijacking of governance by powerful actors for private gain.

To dismantle these structures, reforms must go beyond technical fixes. Accountability mechanisms, such as independent audits of CMC decisions and mandatory inclusion of marginalized groups in decision-making, are critical (Lemos and Agrawal 2009) to prevent capricious state decisions (Natcher 2001). Additionally, addressing the root causes of elite dominance—such as unequal land rights and political patronage—requires legal and institutional overhauls (Hajjar et al. 2021; Ghimire and Lamichhane 2020). Without such measures, forest co-management in Bangladesh will remain a paradox: a system designed for collaboration that perpetuates capture.

6 | Conclusion

Co-management in resource governance, a crucial collaboration between government entities and local populations, holds the potential for effective cooperation and the prevention of capture

by special interests (Singleton 2000). The successful implementation of measures to facilitate effective resource co-management can ensure sufficient resources and logistics for stakeholders and state agencies to collaborate and resist capture (Singleton 2000). However, the use of limited measures to operationalize co-management has led to a deficiency in devolved decision-making power, a prioritization of conservation over locals' livelihood support, and the maintenance of weakened institutions (Rahman 2010). Instead, local elites, with the support of some allies, have continued to exploit their clientele and perpetuate resource extraction, a situation that resonates with the concept of 'state capture' as articulated by Dávid-Barrett (2023). Local elites exploit their clientele to perpetuate resource extraction, while local resource users, in turn, exploit forest resources to fulfill basic needs by sustaining patronage-based relationships with elites to evade legal and other forms of harassment. Therefore, the studied region can be characterized as a contested zone at a broader scale where competing forces attempt to seize forest resources to implement their respective possessions, which can be viewed as a veritable capture ecology according to Cons (2021).

Considering the context of power dynamics (Matose 2006; Castro and Nielsen 2001) and social heterogeneity, we propose a comprehensive approach. This includes decentralization with devolution of power, the establishment of robust institutions, anti-corruption measures, and transparency mechanisms (Sundström 2016; Etiegni et al. 2017; Nunan et al. 2018; Agu et al. 2024). However, these measures are not standalone solutions. They must be part of a broader strategy that promotes good governance (Kometa and Wirnkar 2019) in co-management and resists capture, as this is the ultimate goal of effective resource governance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No datasets were generated or analyzed during this study, as it is based on qualitative research involving participant interviews and narratives. The findings are presented within the manuscript.

Endnotes

¹ Modified from PA rules 2017.

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