Annual Report

Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA)
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Website: www.belabangla.org
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Executive Summary

The reporting period (July 2022- June 2023) was eventful but also hectic. Important cases have been fought in the High Court, relationships with communities have grown stronger, more campaigns, field and community works have increased BELA’s visibility while gaining momentum for environmental justice.

BELA has filed 7 new Public Interest Litigations (PIL) and followed up at least 24 orders and judgments in previous cases. It received 4 judgments that were largely positive but will require further follow-up actions. The issues of the cases were diverse; most cases were filed following complaints from local communities although some cases were filed based on BELA’s own research. All cases required extensive field level work, research, collection and analysis of documents and ofcourse frequent interactions with communities. BELA has improved its skills in procuring and analyzing satellite images that are of great evidential value to the legal action. In the year 2022 and 2023, BELA had to invest substantive resources and time to defend the complainants of the BELA cases in false Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPP) cases.

In the reporting period, BELA engaged in some effective and fruitful campaigns. It successfully worked with the local communities and other activist groups in preventing dumping of dredged soil on the lands of 1500 farmers, attempted conversion of playgrounds for construction of houses despite availability of alternative lands, and mindless cutting of island trees in the name of development. These campaigns not only helped the local communities but have also enriched BELA as it has made new allies and adopted new strategies. The campaign of BELA on Single Use Plastic (SUP) is slowly taking off with the government coming up with new regulations and identified sectors discouraging SUPs in their operations.

BELA has expanded its networks and has also strengthened existing relationships with global and local actors. Bareesh Hasan Chowdhury of BELA is working as the regional facilitator of the Friends of the Earth International (FoEI). BELA has engaged with the UN special Rapporteur on Climate Change and Ship Breaking and organized special programs for them that only show the increased credibility and visibility of the organization. The field offices of BELA have started to develop local level strategic alliances to work more effectively on given local environmental issues. At least 3 offices have formed and activated such alliances who are actively supporting BELA in pursuing the cause of environmental justice.

In the reporting period, 3 in-depth researches have been completed on environmental justice issues in the agricultural sector, challenges in expansion of renewable energy on pleas of scarcity of lands and status of 24 identified rivers of 8 divisions. These researches will all be published and help BELA greatly in its campaign and advocacy work.

As usual, the calendar of BELA was full with events organized both at the national and local level. In most of the events, public officials and also leading personalities of civil society groups were present. These events led to better accountability of the public agencies and in fact, have put them face to face with the aggrieved communities.
Most activities of BELA got good media coverage and BELA now is also much more regular and vibrant in its own social media platforms. The fact that the Chief Executive of BELA has received the Balipara Foundation Award (2022) for her contribution towards developing sustainable innovative methods of living in harmony with nature bears testimony that BELA is on the right track.
A. General Information

A.1. Election of the Executive Committee

The last Annual General Meeting of BELA held on 21 December, 2022 unanimously elected the following members as members to the Executive Committee of BELA for the next term:

(1) Mr. Mirza Quamrul Hasan, Chairman
(2) Ms. Syeda Rizwana Hasan, Chief Executive
(3) Dr. Sumaiya Khair, Treasurer
(4) Ms. Roksana Khondker, Member
(5) Mr. Khalilur Rahman, Member
(6) Ms. Sadia Rowshan Jahan, Member
(7) Mr. Khondker Shamsuddin Mahmood, Member
(8) Ms. Bahreen Khan, Member
(9) Ms. Taslima Islam, Member
(10) Mr. Abu Naser Md Wahid, Member
(11) Ms. Shabnaaz Zahereen, Member

A.2 Staff List

The current number of staff and the gender representation is given in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.</th>
<th>Location of the office</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Barisal</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Tangail</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### A.3 Consultants/Senior Lawyers

In the reporting period, the following consultants/senior lawyers were appointed under various projects:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Consultants/ Lawyers</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1.      | Defending Environmental Rights and Promoting Justice project (Funded by Swedish International Development Agency-Sida) | **Mr. Minhasul Hoque Chowdhury**
Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh  
**Mr. Mohammad Ashraf Ali**
Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh  
**Ms. Shamima Nasreen**
Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh |
|         |          | **Mr. Sheikh Rokonuzzaman**
Secretary General  
Riverine People | Research on ‘State of Rivers in Bangladesh’ |
|         |          | **Mr. Pavel Partha**
Researcher, Ecology and Biodiversity Conservation Coordinator, BARCIK (Bangladesh Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge) | Research on ‘Challenges of the Agriculture Sector in Bangladesh’ |
|         |          | **Dr. Abu Naser Md. Wahid**
Professor  
Department of Law, Rajshahi University | Research on ‘Identifying Gaps and Suggesting Improvements in the Regulatory Regime on Environment’ |
| 3.      | Mid-term evaluation of the project titled “Defending Environmental Rights and Promoting Justice” (funded by Sida) | **Ms. Sheepa Hafiza,** Equality & Rights Activist & Social Analyst  
**Dr. Mushtaque Chowdhury,** Former Vice Chair, BRAC and Founding Director of Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC  
**Dr. Chowdhury Ishrak Ahmed Siddiky,** Head of Department, Department of Law and Human Rights, The Law Counsel Green City Square | Evaluation |
A.4 Interns

During the reporting period, BELA hosted the following interns:

i. Ms. Mashraba Naziat
Mashraba was an under graduate student of Department of Law, Bangladesh University of Professionals. She assisted the BELA research team in drafting set of rules on eco-tourism.

ii. Rysul Hasan
Rysul, a graduate from the Department of Environmental Science of Bangladesh University of Professionals joined as an intern. He assisted the research team with scientific data analysis, survey. He also conducted and trained some BELA staff on satellite image mapping and analysis. He later has joined as Research and Documentation Office in the US Embassy supported project titled “Campaign on the potentiality of Solar photo-voltaic: Special focus on land availability in Bangladesh”.

A.5. Accounts Operation

As per decisions of the EC taken from time to time, the following members are authorized to operate the given accounts of BELA:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Bank, Branch and Account No.</th>
<th>Signatories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1.  | Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association Mother Account | Standard Chartered Bank Dhanmondi Br., Road-5 C/A No. 01 1164585 01 | i) Mirza Quamrul Hasan  
ii) Syeda Rizwana Hasan  
iii) Dr. Sumaiya Khair |
| 2.  | BELA General Fund | Sonali Bank Limited, Dhanmondi Branch SB A/C. No. 002084176 | i) Mirza Quamrul Hasan  
ii) Syeda Rizwana Hasan  
iii) Dr. Sumaiya Khair |
| 3.  | Promoting Responsive Environmental Governance (Swiss Development Cooperation-SDC) | Sonali Bank Limited, Dhanmondi Branch, C/A No SBL 4415602000443 | i) Mirza Quamrul Hasan  
ii) Syeda Rizwana Hasan  
iii) Dr. Sumaiya Khair |
| 4.  | BELA-Defending Environmental Rights and Promoting Justice (SIDA) | Sonali Bank Limited, Dhanmondi Branch, C/A No SBL 4415602000383 | i) Mirza Quamrul Hasan  
ii) Syeda Rizwana Hasan  
iii) Dr. Sumaiya Khair |
| 5.  | BELA –Assisting Communities for Environmental Justice (CAFOD) | Sonali Bank Limited, Dhanmondi Branch, C/A No SBL 4415602000416 | i) Mirza Quamrul Hasan  
ii) Syeda Rizwana Hasan  
iii) Dr. Sumaiya Khair |
A.6 Fixed Deposit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Amount (in Taka)</th>
<th>Scheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>DBH Finance Corporation Ltd</td>
<td>1,58,69,329</td>
<td>Three Months Scheme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.7 Midterm Evaluation

Mid-term evaluation of the SIDA supported project titled “Defending Environmental Rights and Promoting Justice” was conducted by Ms. Sheepa Hafiza, Equality & Rights Activist & Social Analyst; Dr. Mushtaque Chowdhury, Former Vice Chair, BRAC and Founding Director of Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC; Dr. Chowdhury Ishrak Ahmed Siddiky, Head of Department, Department of Law and Human Rights, The Law Counsel Green City Square. Members of the executive committee and BELA staffs were engaged in the process. The evaluation was conducted against the criteria of relevance, efficiency, timeliness, quality, coordination, value for money, learning, visibility, joint activities, impact, sustainability. The recommendations of the evaluation team are given in Annexure “A”.

A.8 Staff Coordination

In-person staff coordination meeting was held on 25 February, 2023 in Rajshahi.

A.9 Organizational Development - Gender Mainstreaming

BELA has made progress in gender mainstreaming. BELA has zero tolerance towards sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) and any other forms of violence. It has a Gender policy, a code of conduct and a draft of Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and
Harassment (PSEAH) policy (to be approved by the EC) that has been made applicable for both the internal staff and to those BELA works with.

B. Programs/Projects

B.1 Ongoing Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Amount (Tk.)</th>
<th>Donor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>March, 2019 till December, 2023</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Defending Environmental Rights and Promoting Justice</td>
<td>BDT 21,69,36,490</td>
<td>Swedish International Cooperation Agency (SIDA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>April, 2021 till March, 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assisting Communities for Environmental Justice</td>
<td>BDT 74,04,333</td>
<td>Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD)</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>March, 2022 to February, 2024</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Empowering Ethnic Communities to Defend their Land Rights and Promote Conservation</td>
<td>BDT 23,06,157</td>
<td>Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD)</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>April, 2022 to December, 2022</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Support the Treatment and Medication cost of Ship Breaking Workers</td>
<td>BDT 15,96,000</td>
<td>BRAC International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>January, 2022 till August, 2024</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disappearing Urban Wetlands in Bangladesh: Action Research on Socio-economic Governance and Legal Aspects</td>
<td>BDT 82,40,000</td>
<td>Tang Prize Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>June, 2022 to July, 2023</td>
<td>Forest Protection and Responsible Tourism</td>
<td>BDT 14,77,475</td>
<td>Friends of the Earth International (FoEI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>April, 2022 to December, 2022</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Renewable Energy Targets, Implementation and Revisional Needs</td>
<td>BDT 12,00,000</td>
<td>Friends of the Earth International (FoEI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>September, 2022 to December, 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting Responsive Environmental Governance</td>
<td>BDT 1,34,00,000</td>
<td>Swedish Development Cooperation (SDC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>October, 2022 to December, 2023 (extension sought till April, 2024)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Campaign on the Potential of Solar Photovoltaics</td>
<td>BDT 85,38,031</td>
<td>Embassy of the United States of America in Dhaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sl.</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Project</td>
<td>Amount (Tk.)</td>
<td>Donor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>September, 2022 to December, 2023 (extended till April, 2024)</td>
<td>Protecting Rivers from Industrial Pollution</td>
<td>BDT 47,00,000</td>
<td>Embassy of the United States of America in Dhaka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**B.2 Proposed/Upcoming Projects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Project Name and Budget</th>
<th>Donor</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>April, 2024 to March, 2025</td>
<td>Empowering the capacity of Indigenous Communities for promotion of land and other rights and biodiversity conservation (2nd Phase)</td>
<td>CAFOD</td>
<td>Submitted to the CAFOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BDT 19,50,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>January, 2024 to December, 2026</td>
<td>Defending Environmental Rights and Promoting Justice (2nd phase)</td>
<td>SIDA</td>
<td>Received Letter of Intent; Submitted to the NGOAB for approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BDT .....</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**B.3 Geographic Coverage**

The number of areas covered by BELA in the reporting period is given below:

- No. of Divisions covered: 8
- No. of Districts covered: 55
- No. of Upazila covered: 138

**C. Major Activities**

**C.1. Legal Aid and Assistance**

In the reporting period, the following 7 PILs have been filed:

- Protecting the Lalmai Hills of Cumilla (Writ Petition No. 13500/2022)
- Preventing the operation of a hazardous dockyard in Banaripara Upazila, Barishal (Writ Petition No. 6178/2022)
• Protecting a playfield in Balaishimul, Kendua Upazila, Netrokona (Writ Petition No. 9501/2022)
• Protecting 887 ponds of Gazipur (Writ Petition No. 10493/2022)
• Regulating the stone crusher machines in Lalmonirhat (Writ Petition No. 3257/2022)
• Protecting the largest playfield in Dhupkhola from construction of a market by DSCC (Writ Petition No. 2032/2023)
• Protecting 5 canals of Sunamgonj (Writ Petition No. 1081/2023)

In all the cases filed above, favourable interim orders have been obtained. Additionally, 4 cases (protecting DAP identified wetland in Mirpur from being filled in by BADC; restoring the 306.94 acres Chakirposhar beel/river in Kurigram from encroachment and leasing; cancelling settlements of forest lands for construction of journalist housing in Cox’s Bazar; protecting and restoring the worst polluted Lobondoho river in Gazipur) have been filed in 2023 the groundwork (field investigation, community consultations, collection of documents, serving of notices and so on) for which were done in the reporting period. The PILs on Dhupkhola field and Lalmai hills were filed by BELA while the other cases were filed on the basis of local complaints. Additionally, 28 PILs were followed up.

Assistance have also been given to complainants in 2 cases who were faced with harassing Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPP) cases by the opponents. The family of the complainant in the case of Banaripara Dockyard faced 5 SLAPP cases. BELA talked to the police and managed final reports. In the case against Unique Group forcibly dumping sands on the fertile agricultural lands of farmers in Sonargaon, Narayanganj, legal and also financial assistance had to be given to 3 members of a farmers’ family who were falsely tagged as workers of a religious group and faced with harassing cases.

In the reporting period, 4 judgments have been received in cases on protecting Bhairab River from tannery pollution at Taltala in Nawapara in Abhaynagar Upazila of Jashore district; restoring and protecting a beel in Bijoynagar Upazila, Brahmanbaria District from being filled up by local MP for construction of his private university; constructing hotel in Saint Martin’s Island defying DoE prohibition, and protecting water bodies from filling up for implementing housing projects, Sylhet (W.P. No. 15782 of 2018, W. P. No. 10417 of 2021, W. P. No. 12476 of 2017 & W.P. No 4400 of 2009). In the last one, the High Court judgment was against BELA for which appeal was filed. The appeal was disposed of with observation and directions about protection of beels inside the housing areas and compliance with DoE clearances.

A summary of the 7 PILs, 28 follow-up PILs, 4 judgments, a list of legal notices, contempt notices, concern letters (total 80) and applications (total 129) filed under the Right to Information Act is given in Annexures “B” and “C”.

Besides filing PILs, initiatives were also taken to secure administrative relief.
**C.2 Trainings**

- **Training Workshop for Judicial Officials**
  In collaboration with the Judicial Administration Training Institute (JATI), 1 training workshop on ‘Environment, Environmental Law and Justice’ was organized on 3rd December, 2022. A total of 68 Assistant Judges attended the workshop. Mr. J. B. M. Hassan, Honorable Justice, High Court Division, Supreme Court of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh attended the workshop as Chief Guest.

- **Cross-Sector Professionals Training**
  A 5-day long training was arranged on 04-08 September, 2022 with 18 participants from the government sector, NGOs, academia and postgraduate students. The participants were enlightened on different aspects of the environment, environmental law and justice by a total of 17 resource persons who are all national level experts. The main objective of this training is to disseminate theoretical and practical knowledge on environment and ecology among all sections of people. The trainees were taken to a field visit to the green-certified Tarasima Apparels factory of BITOPI Group.

- **Special Training with BIWTA officials**
  A special three-day training on “Water and Environment” was organized from 16-19 February, 2023 in Dhaka, Bangladesh in collaboration with the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

- **Trainings on Sustainable Agriculture**
  A series of training was organized for a total of 216 farmers on organic/sustainable agriculture. These trainings were arranged in Munshiganj, Keraniganj, Savar, Manikganj, Dhamrai and Gazipur. The founder of PRAKRITIK Krishi (Natural Agriculture) Mr. Delowar Jahan and the Associate Coordinator, PRAKRITIK Krishi, Md. Iftekhar Ali conducted the sessions as key resource persons. A checklist of 10 questions was used prior to the sessions.

The analysis of the answers revealed that industrialization, unplanned urbanization, and intensive agriculture not only reduced the fertility and long-term productivity of the soil but also undermined public health, destroyed the livelihoods of the poor and created inequality in land distribution and access to natural resources. The basic practices of modern industrial agriculture – intensive ploughing, monoculture, irrigation, application of inorganic fertilizer, chemical pest control, genetic manipulation of domesticated plants and animals and factory farming of animals– have led to a major compromise on future productivity in favour of high productivity for the present. The agricultural resources – soil, water, genetic diversity, etc. are overdrawn and degraded and the ecological processes on which agriculture ultimately depends are altered.
C.3 Public Events

Several workshops, discussions, dialogues, FGDs, public hearings etc. were arranged all over Bangladesh to sensitize relevant actors on various environmental issues and about PIL decisions. Through these events, working relationships with the government and other relevant actors have strengthened. At the same time, intervention needs in new areas and issues have also been identified. The honourable justices of the Supreme Court, MPs, public officials, elected representatives attended these events.

Brief descriptions of some major events are given below:

- **PIL Review Workshop**
  A PIL review workshop was jointly organized by BELA and Association of Land Reforms and Development (ALRD) from 15- 17 June, 2023 in Cox’s Bazar.

  The sessions covered the following issues:
  - Role of PIL in ensuring justice
  - PIL to protect natural resources
  - PIL in protecting indigenous people’s rights
  - PIL on wetlands and water rights
  - Rights to land and shelter
  - PIL in protecting rights of minority people in Bangladesh

  The participants of the Workshop were practicing PIL lawyers and activists. **Mr. Justice K M Kamrul Kader & Mr. Justice Md. Mozibur Rahman Miah**, High Court division, Supreme Court of Bangladesh were present in the workshop.

- **Seminar**
  On May 18, 2023 BELA, ALRD and the daily Samakal jointly organized a Seminar on “Measures required to address the environmental degradation in Cox’s Bazar”. The participants emphasized on more actions against illegal encroachments and pollution of rivers, hill cutting, sand mining, plastic usage as these are major environmental concerns of Cox’s Bazar. Based on the Seminar recommendations, an action plan has been prepared by BELA for follow-up actions in Cox’s Bazar.

- **Public Hearing on Environmental Degradation in Gazipur**
  On 7th November 2022, a public hearing was organized by BELA in association with Bangladesh River Travelers Network (BRTN). The hearing titled “Ways to Redress the Environmental Degradation in Gazipur” was graced by the DC of Gazipur district as chief guest. Representatives from the Department of Environment (DoE), Department of Fisheries (DoF), Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), Forest Department, Department of
Agricultural Extension, BIWTA were present in the hearing. Some industrial houses and private sector actors were also present.

- **Issue Based Discussions**  
A total of 22 issue-based discussions were held. Brief of the events is given in a table in Annexure “D”.

- **Community Consultations**  
During the reporting period, 16 community consultations were held. Brief description of the consultations is given in Annexure “E”.

- **FGDs**  
A total of 12 FGDs were conducted in the reporting period and are mentioned in Annexure “F”. The FGDs were conducted to identify new issues and also to get people’s perceptions around issues being considered for legal action.

- **Dialogue with Local Level State and Non-state Actors**  
9 dialogues with state and non-state actors were held. List of these events is given in Annexure “G”.

- **Beneficiary Feedback Meetings**  
5 beneficiary feedback meetings were held list of which is given in Annexure “H”.

- **Human Chains and Rallies**  
5 human chains and rallies were organized list of which is given in Annexure “I”.

- **Day Observations**  
7 special days were observed in this reporting period. List of these events is given in Annexure “J”.

**C.4 Research**

Three researches have been completed in the reporting period. The research on State of Environment in Bangladesh with focus on agriculture has 11 chapters that have depicted the cures of modern agriculture and discussed the potential of organic and natural agriculture. This research has been conducted by Mr. Pavel Partha. Mr. Partha is a researcher of Ecology and Biodiversity Conservation. The Study report is now going through peer review and awaiting publication.

The second research on the State of Environment in Bangladesh with focus on rivers has been concluded by Mr. Sheikh Rokonuzzaman, Founding Secretary and Riverine People. The
research has been conducted on the basis on secondary review and also intense collection of community testimonies. KIIIs were done, FDGs were conducted and community consultations were help. The report has focused on the state of 24 rivers of all 8 divisions.

A third research on the potential of photovoltaics is underway. The research is being jointly done by Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN) and BELA to assess the actual state of land availability for promotion of solar.

C.5 Networking and Strategic Alliances

The field offices of BELA have been encouraged to form strategic alliances on given advocacy issues. As such, the Barishal, Mymensingh and Sylhet offices have formed strategic alliances to work on rivers and stone extraction from the ecologically sensitive rivers and wetlands. The members of the alliances are engaging with BELA to advocate with local level policy makers, sensitize the local press and also identify appropriate action interventions.

In addition to the regular online meetings with network members, BELA also arranged **2 in-person network members meetings** in Rangpur (25-26 November, 2022) and Rajshahi (26 February, 2023) that took place back-to-back with divisional level meetings on river protection.

BELA personnel have attended several meetings of the Friends of the Earth International (FoEl) and its working groups, the CoP-27 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the AGM of IUCN, and the Annual General Meeting of the NGO Ship Breaking Platform.

Bareesh Hasan Chowdhury of BELA is working as Regional Facilitator of FoEl.
C.6 Advocacy and Campaign

C.6.1 Protecting agricultural land from sand dumping in Mongla

The Mongla Port Authority (MPA) selected 300 acres of agricultural land of Banishanta Union, Dakop Upazila in Khulna to dump sand that would be dredged from the river Pashur to increase river navigability. The lands were purported to be requisitioned or 2 years. Around 1,500 local farmers, mostly belonging to a religious minority, have been protesting against the decision of the MPA for months as they feared eventual eviction if their farmlands were to be covered with sand and lose arability. The locals filed a legal case without any luck before approaching BELA for assistance.

BELA developed a strategic partnership with the ALRD, Nijera Kori, BRAC, Bangladesh Legal and Services Trust (BLAST), Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), Hindu-Boudhyo Oikyo Parishad and other local and national level land and human rights groups. The following events were organized with lead from BELA to draw attention of policymakers about the situation and the irony of destroying fertile agricultural lands in violation of policies and government’s own express position to protect agricultural land from development:

- On 6 July 2022, a letter was sent to all concerned Secretaries and other government agencies to choose an alternative site for dumping the dredged soil and protect the agricultural land of Banishanta
- On 3 August, 2022, BELA and others from the alliance visited Banishanta
- On 4 August, 2022, a meeting was held with the DC of Khulna in which representatives of the affected community participated; a memo was presented to the DC with a clear proposal for alternative sites
- On 5 August, 2022, a massive gathering of all villagers was arranged
- On 11 August, 2022, a team met the Minister of Planning and sought his support; this meeting was joined by the local MP
- On 14 August, 2022, a team met the Secretary, Ministry of the Shipping and expressed their concerns
- To counter the claims of the MPA about the dredged soil being fertile, BELA, in August, 2022, engaged an organization named Greenbud to test the dredged soil
- On 25 October, 2022, a team sent a letter again to the State Minister of the Ministry of the Shipping seeking his intervention in the matter
- On 27 October, 2022, a press conference was organized
- As pressure on the local community was mounting to accept the MPA decision, a team from Dhaka once again visited Banishanta and held a public gathering
On 2 November 2022, the team once again talked to the DC of Khulna at his office and warned him about massive uproar in case MPA exerts pressures on the community.

Meanwhile, the CE of BELA approached an Adviser to the PM who in turn arranged a file visit by the DC. A team also met the Cabinet Secretary who apparently also intervened. All these systematic interventions has led to a halt in the process and hopefully the MPA will now be forced to switch to a suitable alternate site.

Eventually the government has abandoned the plan to use the Banishanta land for sand dumping which is a huge victory of local movements aided by national level players.

C.6.2 Stop Single Use Plastics and Encourage Use of Eco-Friendly Alternatives

Following the order dated 6 January, 2020 passed in Writ Petition No. 14941/2019 filed by BELA to regulate the use of Single Use Plastics (SUP), the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has issued a notification banning use of certain SUPs in 21 coastal district. BELA has also written to 390 hotel, motel, and restaurant owners of the country to stop using SUPs. It has also targeted the coastal district of Cox’s Bazar for a campaign on SUPs based on the premise prohibitions. On 8th October, 2022 BELA arranged a dialogue with hotels, motels and tour operators of Cox’sBazar to foster implementation of the court directives and raise public awareness. About 30 business people attended on this dialogue.

BELA has prepared a video on the subject which it has plans to show to school and college students via its divisional offices and also through recruitment of volunteers. The video posted on the BELA website is already popular. The video was officially launched on the World Environment Day, 2023 at the DoE. On that day, BELA along with ALRD, Environment and Social Development Organization (ESDO), Bangladesh Resource Center for Indigenous Knowledge (BARCIK), Bondhu Foundation, Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB) Trust and Green Savers jointly organized a discussion under the banner “Stop Single Use Plastics, Encouraging Use of Eco-Friendly Alternatives”. Begum Habibun Nahar, MP, Hon’ble Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change was present as the Chief Guest while Mr. Abdul Hamid, Director General of the Department of Environment Chaired the conference.

BELA itself does not use any SUP in any of its events and the BELA office is largely SUP free.

C.6.3 Mapping the adaptation needs of the coastal communities with the UN Special Rapporteur

On 9th September, 2022, the newly appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur on Climate Change and Human Rights, Mr. Ian Fry, met with civil society representatives and members of frontline communities in Khulna in a program arranged by BELA. This was part of the first
country visit by the new UN Special Rapporteur and he heard from the participants and especially the community members about the devastating impacts of climate change and the loss and damage being experienced by them. The meeting was presided over by BELA Chief Executive, Syeda Rizwana Hasan. Mohon Kumar Mondol of LEDARS, gave a special presentation on the plight of the frontline coastal communities. The discussion centered around four main pillars: 1) The harms being caused by climate change, 2) How the communities are coping and adapting to the changing climate, 3) What mitigation initiatives are being taken and 4) What risks and intimidation are being faced by those working to protect and ensure human rights in the face of climate change. Several issues came to light through the meeting including failing embankments, rising salinity, inadequate cyclone shelters, food insecurity and how women are more adversely affected in natural disasters. The meeting was attended by 34 participants.

C.6.4 UN Representative Meets the Shipbreaking Workers
On 14 November 2022, a team of UN representatives met the older shipbreaking workers and discussed their working conditions. Worth noting, through its European and international allies, BELA is regularly working with EU and the UN for stopping the hazardous mode of operation in the ship breaking yards in Chittagong.

C.6.5 Saving the Satmasjid Road Trees
In January 2023, the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) began rebuilding the traffic divider of Sat Masjid Road in Dhanmondi by cutting down standing old and mature trees. This was happening with no local consultation and under a so-called “beautification” project. BELA arranged and assisted to arrange press conference, submission of memos to authorities and local representative, ceasing of the office of the Mayor, DSCC, march for protection of the trees and so on.

Following extensive works led by BELA and also a group of devoted youth activists, the DSCC finally had to abandon the plan of further tree cutting. The issue received huge public attention and support.

C.6.6 Protecting Balaishimul Playground
The DC office of Netrokona, under instruction of the local MP, wanted to construct Asrayan houses in the century old Balaishimul play field. As locals protested and faced harassment from the administration. As they approached BELA for legal assistance, BELA not only filed a Writ Petition (WP No. 9501 of 2022) and got injunction on the construction, but also got on board other national level groups and joined forced with the local people.

The local administration has finally abandoned the plan.
Besides, BELA has also joined the local people in celebrating the victory of winning over the Tetultala playfield from the Police plan to construct police station therein; campaigned for protection of the historic Khan Jahan Ali Dighi (pond), and held an Environmental Summit along with other like minded groups.

D. Award

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, Chief Executive of BELA was recently awarded the 16th Annual International Women of Courage Awards, 2022 by the U.S Department of State and Green Legal Award from Balipara Foundation.

E. Challenges

Increased harassment moves against the BELA staffs, network members and the affected communities are becoming major concerns. BELA seriously needs to invest in according due protection to its staff and also launch a desk to deal with harassment of community members.

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