

# Opportunities for Establishing Community Conserved Areas for Sustainable Livelihood for the Local Community in the Tertiary Hills of Bangladesh<sup>1</sup>

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The overall trend of declining natural forest habitats in Bangladesh is severe and the pace of destruction has been accelerated constantly since 1970s. Although about 17% of the country is identified as forest land, according to a recent study (SPARRSO 2007) at present about 7.3% of the country is under forest tree cover, primarily mangrove vegetation covering about 4000 sq km. Remote sensing based change analysis reveals that that natural forest cover has been reduced more than 60% since the 1970s. An estimation carried out in 1990 indicated that Bangladesh had less than 0.02 ha of forestland per person - the lowest forest to population ratio in the world.

Like other countries in South Asia, such as India, Nepal and Bhutan, any initiative to separate forestry from development would be irrational, because of deep inter-linkage between the issues. The following analytical overview would portray the 'nexus' between the forest conservation, poverty, livelihood and sustainable development.

## **Forest Destruction: Interface between People's Existence and Extinction**

It has been evident in Bangladesh and many other countries that the immediate victims of forest destructions are the poor people who depend on forests for their life and livelihood. In Bangladesh examples can be drawn from Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and Madhupur Tract. Although in a generic manner, the major reasons for forest destruction can be placed under three major categories: 1) land use changes for crop agriculture, settlement, and infrastructure development; 2) unsustainable forest product harvests – both legal and illegal; and 3) lack of effective governance failing to protect the forest and forest land. A further analysis for the reasons above would reveal that the 'root cause' of forest destruction lies in the fact that—it was everybody's (from poor resource users to policy makers) failure to be really motivated to understand the dependencies between "forest-poverty-livelihood-sustainability" and their actions. Research shows that in the 'responsibility-accountability' web for forest destruction, poor resource users' roles are often extremely insignificant in comparison with others. This is particularly true for the forest destructions in the Tertiary Hills of Bangladesh.

## **Failure to Address Watershed Issues: Exacerbating sufferings for the local poor as a Cost of Inaction**

There is a broad based understanding among the policy makers and general mass about the implications of deforestation and other actions such as water withdrawal/diversion in the upper catchments areas in India, Nepal and China. However, understanding and awareness about the significance of micro watershed management is extremely poor. So far, only a limited

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<sup>1</sup> The views in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations or UNDP

number of initiatives have been undertaken in relation to watershed management approach and those were basically under different natural resources management projects.

Cost of this inaction is visible in people's life and livelihood. Although there was no empirical study conducted to measure the reduction in interception because of indiscriminate deforestation in the Hills, the impacts are very visible in the form of acute water scarcity in the CHT specifically during dry season. Most of the streams (locally known as *charra*) in Chittagong, CHT and Greater Sylhet get dry during dry season. As a result, people's life (water for every day use) and livelihood (water for crop culture, horticulture, navigation etc.) are being affected.

Lack of watershed management approach is also result in polluting other ecosystems including wetlands in the down stream and soil contamination. Top soil loss is another serious implication because of the lack of watershed approach. In tern, these soils are going to the streams, lakes and rivers and being deposited in the bed causing less carrying capacity in the water bodies. Alterations in the ecosystem level diversity ultimately affected the species and genetic diversity in the region. Poor people are the worst victims of all these consequences.

### **Forest Ecosystems-- a Source of Livelihood and Environmental Services: Lack of Strategic Planning and Weak Governance**

Forestry sector in general, provides livelihoods and income to many sub-sectors and to low income households. There are still 57,000 wood industry production units with primary industries such as saw mills, pulp and paper industries, plywood/veneer, match and panel board production. Secondary industries are furniture, and wood seasoning, treatment and preservation. Sixty-five percent of forest products are consumed as fuel wood. Including wood collectors, estimated total full time forestry employment is more than 5 million. In addition, millions of rural poor are dependent on the forest produces for significant supplement to their food and income. Beside this direct benefit, forest ecosystems contain extremely significant values for its environmental services. In general, there was substantial inadequacy in government's plans and actions in conceptualizing the dynamics of this complex issue of deforestation and utilization aspects of the public and community forest eco-systems including its conservation significance.

### **Common Property Resource Pool: Supplemental Food Bank for the Hard Core Poor**

In general, common resource pools such as pubic forest or wetland ecosystems are the sources of supplemental food and livelihood for the hard core poor in rural Bangladesh. Despite the alarming trends in biodiversity loss both in terms of species and ecosystem diversity, Bangladesh still possesses rich biodiversity (5000 species of flowing plants, 266 inland fishes, 442 marine fishes, 22 amphibians, 109 inland reptiles, 17 marine reptiles, 388 resident birds, 240 migratory birds, 110 inland mammals and 3 marine mammals), and most of them resides in remaining forested and wetland ecosystems. Both aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems provide the hard core poor (daily dietary intake  $\pm 1500$  calorie/day/person) with supplemental food from its diverse plants and animal species. Alteration and degradation of these ecosystems are affecting the food security situation of these poor resource users which is ultimately deferring country's progress towards achieving the targets under MDG 1.

An additional threat is being posed to the hard core poor because of the lack of harmonized policy and legal regime and institutional mandates. Leasing policy is one of the most relevant examples.

### **Tertiary Hills of Bangladesh: Under Utilized Potential of Collaborative Management of Forest Resources for Poverty Alleviation and Biodiversity Conservation**

In the CHT, potential of both community and natural forestry exist at the highest level. Combining with reforestation, activation of Community Conserved Area System in the Un-Classed State Forest Land would be a key to restore the degraded ecosystems in the hills. The relationship between watershed resource management, land use and livelihood is critically important as it links biodiversity conservation to the productive systems and cultural values of the CHT's indigenous populations. There is now a growing consensus regarding the main problems and issues that affect the watershed use and people's livelihood in the CHT region.

### **Opportunity Not Lost—Community Conserved Area Approach as an Instrument for Poverty Reduction and Biodiversity Conservation**

In spite of the above dismal scenario and various constraints, there have been a number of noteworthy successes in this country. Homestead forestry by the households is a successful sector in Bangladesh where Bangladesh Forest Department and the Government as a whole played a key role in supporting community initiatives. Strip plantations such as embankment, railway and road side plantation by the government with support from the community is another success in the sector. There have been piecemeal success examples in collaborative natural resources management in different ecosystems which would need up-scaling and mainstreaming of the lessons learned.

Another example in the CHT is the Village Common Forests (VCFs or *mouza* forests) which are compatible with conservation objectives, and traditionally practiced Homestead Forestry manifesting indigenous knowledge and practices. While a number of independent and localized research activities have explored dynamics of these experiences, there has hardly been any effort to systematically collate and assess these experiences. Nor have there been any strategic interventions to support these local initiatives with a view to further strengthening and replicating them to cater to people's livelihood needs.

In light of the importance of forest management to the local economy and to local livelihoods and well-being, the country needs to act with an effective strategic plan and its implementation. The plan must consider the poor people's dependency on the forest resources and environmental services of forest ecosystems integrating the objective to retain the forest biodiversity assets for future development.

To this end, the international conservation community, as evidenced in decisions of recent World Parks Congresses, have placed a high priority on development of formal approaches for enabling communities to be given rights and authorities for managing forest lands and biodiversity, especially when such management can benefit from traditional community knowledge and practices. This category of forests and biodiversity is generically entitled "Community Conserved Areas" or CCAs. At present, the Government of Bangladesh has not yet taken any steps to collate CCA practices nor to formalize them as a category of forest

and biodiversity management. This is an important gap in the policy framework in Bangladesh, and one that needs addressing.

<http://www.newagebd.com/2008/mar/17/oped.html>