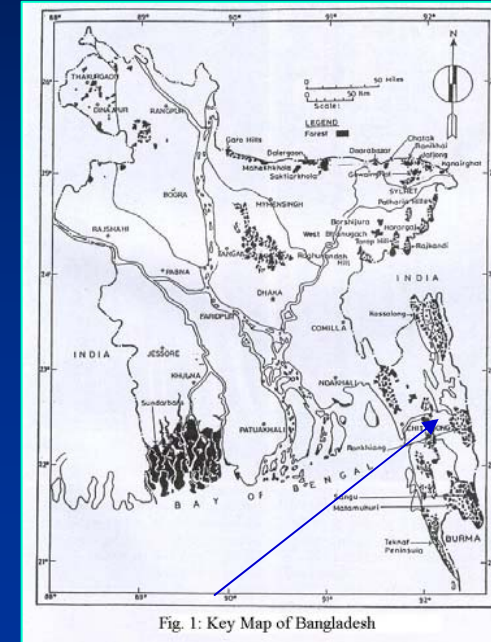


**Conservation and Livelihood
Strategies of the Village Common
Forest (*Mouza Reserves*)
Communities in Chittagong Hill
Tracts, Bangladesh**

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Introduction

- Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs) in south east Bangladesh represent most of the country's forest land managed mainly by Gov. agencies
- Much of the forested area is faced with severe mismanagement such as:
 - clear-felling of natural forests
 - land degradation due to monoculture plantation
 - deterioration in soil and water quality due to intensification of agricultural practices
- The adverse impacts of mismanagement have seriously affected livelihood of indigenous communities and conservation of watershed



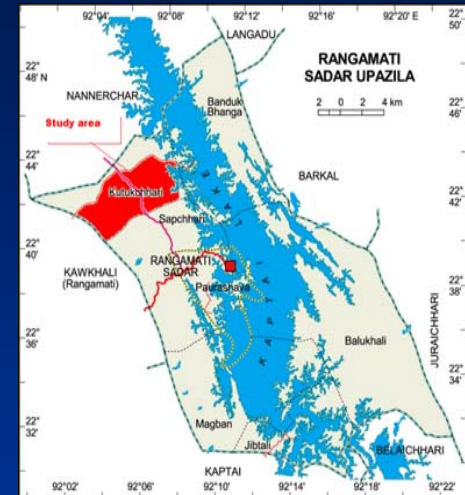
Background

- However, a few community-managed Village Common Forests (VCFs), or *Mouza Reserves*, play important role in indigenous people's livelihood and environmental conservation in the region
- VCFs contain headwaters of streams, and natural springs- crucial for watershed management, and are homes of diverse animal and plant life including medicinal herbs and plants
- They are the main sources of wood and bamboo for house building and other needs of hill villagers.
- However, neither are the VCFs recognized by the government agencies nor are any VCF management principles taken care of while formulating and/or implementing resources management plans in the hilly landscape



Methodology

- The study was carried out in Rangamati and Bandarban districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts during December 2006 to December 2007
- 10 villages from Rangamati and 3 villages from Bandarban were selected- mostly VCF villages
- About 140 households from the two districts were interviewed with structured questionnaires where about 40 households were non-VCF villagers
- Basic indicators in livelihood strategies were assessed and resource conservation practices examined



Objectives of Study

- To evaluate the existing livelihood (and conservation) strategies of the *mouza-ban* communities across major seasons
- To examine the relationship between (VCF) community indigenous knowledge and their livelihood and conservation strategies
- To assess the potential of VCF management system in ensuring sustainable forest resources management in the region



Focus of Study

- Evaluation and comparison of :
the **ethno-ecological knowledge and practices of resource management** in the VCF communities with that in the non-VCF communities
- A comparative assessment on :
resources use culture between the VCF and the non-VCF communities has been done and its relationship to **conservation of watershed** and **local livelihood** has been examined



Key Results and Lessons

- **VCF management**
- **VCFs as means of conservation and livelihood**
- **Livelihood of VCF communities**
- **Policy implications of research results**



VCF Management

- A management committee headed by **karbari** (village head) manages VCF with the customary rules and laws
- The natural forest land under VCF is never used for **jhum** (slash and burn) cultivation
- Harvesting forest produces from the VCFs are allowed by the village leader for community use and not for commercial sale or for individual cash earning
- **Timber is not generally extracted** from VCFs except when required for some community uses such as construction of school, prayer centers etc
- However, **firewood**, **culinary herbs** and non-wood products such as **bamboos** are allowed to harvest
- One example of plant conservation method of the VCF communities is that only the local **kabiraj** or medicine men are permitted to enter VCFs for collection of herbs

VCF as Means of Conservation and Livelihood

- Presence of understorey herbs and other smaller plants is the primary indicator of good site conditions congenial for soil and water conservation
- In some places communities are totally dependent on VCFs to sustain water flow of perennial stream so as to meet year round water requirement
- VCF communities have been found to be more meticulous in gathering forest produces or hunting animals as compared to the non-VCF communities
- Annual overhead costs for construction and repair of houses are largely offset through harvesting house construction materials from the VCFs
- Culinary and medicinal herbs gathered from VCFs on year round basis are essential supplement to dietary and medicinal requirements for the communities

VCF Resources, Kutukchhari, Rangamati



Livelihood of VCF Communities:

Forest Sources

- Most of the produces used from VCFs are bamboos (67% of all the produces followed by wood (20%), medicinal plants (8.33%), fuelwood (5%) and other minor forest products (3.33%)
- While for the non-VCF users bamboos are 52%, wood is 40%, med. plants are 1.67% and fuelwood is 3.33% of the total produces used
- Income from both processed and unprocessed forest products except those of wood are higher for the VCF communities compared with non-VCF communities
- While VCF people use perennial water bodies and cooperative ponds for fish harvest, the non-VCF people depend on lakes and other annual water-bodies

Livelihood of VCF Communities: Outside Forest Sources

- Income from wage labour and business for VCF people are far lower compared with that for the non-VCF people
- The VCF people grew more rice and vegetables but less turmeric and ginger as compared with the non-VCF people
- Except pineapple all other horticultural crops are grown in higher quantities by the VCF people
- Banana, pineapple, coconut, lemon and papaya are the common source of income across different seasons
- VCF communities rear more cattle, goats, and pigs but less ducks and chicken than the non-VCF people



Policy Implications of Res. Results

- It seems that there is:
 - a huge potential of VCFs in conservation of forest, soil and water in **some critical locations**
 - a wealth of indigenous knowledge and cultures involved in management of VCF resources essential for **integrated resources management in the entire hilly landscape**
- A big constraint to these community forests is:
 - **lack of tenure security**
 - pressure from the **Forest Department** to acquire the **land for monoculture plantation** purpose

Therefore, special tenurial security arrangement for VCFs could be ensured through promulgation of special forestry rules where indigenous knowledge and techniques are taken care of

Conclusions and Recommendations

- VCFs could certainly act as **models of resource conservation** in the degraded hilly landscape.
- But VCFs not recognized as common property of the communities- no technical, financial support from government departments to maintain these forests.
- The important role of these community protected forests in the **livelihoods** and **culture** of the indigenous communities should be recognized, including their **function** in **local water supply protection** and as a **social safety net** for the **poorest**.
- Besides formalizing the existing ones, adequate measures should be taken for rejuvenation of the already deteriorating VCFs
- Ultimately, the tenurial security of the VCFs will perhaps be crucial factor towards the long term sustenance of VCFs which calls for political will of government