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

- VCF Plant diversity: bamboos
- Perennial stream
- Herbs and small plants
- Rice paddy
- Water hole near spring
- Clear water

VCF Plant diversity

Perennial stream

Herbs and small plants

Rice paddy

Water hole near spring

Clear water
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.