



# Mainstreaming Community Engagement for Sustainable Landscape Management in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

## Summary

- Engaging communities in natural resource management is a prerequisite for sustainability where there is a high degree of forest-dependence. This is especially relevant in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where maintaining and restoring its highly biodiverse forests is urgently needed and local communities are critical to its success.
- Although various community-based forest management initiatives have been operating in other areas of Bangladesh, long-standing socio-political conflicts between multiple stakeholders involved in land management have restricted the introduction of social or community-based forestry at significant scale in the CHT.
- A gap is being created due to the perceived inaction of the Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD) to exercise their legal mandate hence the forests of CHT are suffering from the notion of 'the tragedy of the commons'. As a result, each user's exploitation of the forest is depriving other members of society.
- In this context, a win-win mechanism needs to be devised to incentivize CHT communities to practice Sustainable Land Management (SLM), in alignment with the draft National Forest Policy to protect and expand the delivery of ecosystem services from state forests (GoB, 2016).
- This note describes how, under the World Bank-led PROGREEN initiative, and during the process of developing a land use plan, Arannayk Foundation assessed the challenges and potentiality of mainstreaming community engagement in SLM in the CHT.
- It is crucial to acknowledge, respect and promote the rights of forest communities in the CHT. This includes recognizing their traditional knowledge, customary practices, and land tenure rights. By involving forest communities in decision-making processes and empowering them to manage their forests, their expertise and insights can contribute significantly to SLM efforts.
- Internationally, models of community forest management have been shown to successfully restore forest cover and there is extensive literature describing and advocating the principles to be followed in their design.
- To break the current deadlock preventing effective management, policy dialogue and amendments are needed to introduce community-based forest management to ensure effective distribution of roles and responsibilities for CHT forests between state and community actors.

## Background

CHT comprise more than one-third of the country's forests which is rich in biodiversity and is home to 12 socio-culturally distinct ethnic communities who are largely dependent on forest resources for livelihoods and subsistence (Ahammad and Stacey, 2016). In recent decades, forests have become severely degraded mainly due to increased demographic pressure aggravated by unplanned land-use and mismanagement. The age old traditional practice of *jhum* is failing to maintain the integrity of natural ecosystems and a sustainable production cycle (Chakma and Nahar, 2013). Overexploitation of forest resources, forest land conversions, and reduced fallow period in *jhum* cultivation resulted in loss of biodiversity and habitat, increased soil erosion and landslides, and declined crop production. Cumulatively, these are impacting the cultural and socio-economic conditions of forest-dependent communities.

Since the early 1980s, BFD has developed some positive credence by fostering community participation in several social forestry programs (Muhammed *et al.*, 2005). The enactment of the 2004 Social Forestry Rules paved the legal path for community involvement in state-initiated forestry projects under benefit sharing agreements (BFD, 2004). As of 2022, more than 0.75 million beneficiaries including 0.15 million women were involved in social forestry programs nationally.

However, in the CHT, due to ongoing land ownership and rights issues BFD has met with resistance while attempting to fulfil its official mandate. Thus, no major forestry program has been undertaken to restore forest landscapes and embed SLM principles and the forest continues to be degraded further.

### Salient issues affecting sustainable landscape management

- **Unplanned land use leads to land degradation.** The lush green forests in the CHT play a key role in maintaining hydrological functions of the ecosystem, such as through keeping the river/stream water at a steady level, protecting the soils, and regulating the local climate. Severe

degradation takes place mainly due to increased demographic pressure worsened by unplanned land-use and mismanagement.

*Jhum* - the mainstay of livelihood for the hill communities - is experiencing a steady declining productivity due to reduced soil fertility and decreased fallow period leading to expansion of *Jhum*. This also pushes the communities towards adoption of alternative crops and horticulture. Ultimately, *Jhum* becomes one of the major drivers of deforestation and forest degradation.

- **Poor stakeholder coordination.** Stakeholders from both formal and informal institutions with different levels of influence and authority have diverging perceptions on forest land use which generates conflicts and mistrust. Thus, community involvement in restoration programs have become increasingly limited.

- **Inter-institutional gap and legal pluralism in forest governance and resource management.** The socio-political situation, forest and land ownership issues have significantly widened the gap between formal and informal institutions. Moreover, the state-owned forest of CHT falls under two legal types - reserved forest and unclassified state forest (USF), the latter falling under the governance of the district administration rather than BFD. Both reserved forest and USF are gradually becoming fragmented, degraded, and converted to other non-forest lands (Khan, 2001).

- **Memorandum of social forestry program adjournment.** Several institutional and legal reforms took place to promote participatory forestry in Bangladesh. However, CHT was devoid of this process as it was constrained by the CHT Regional Council (CHRC/2008 Part-1/906) until all land conflicts are resolved as per the provision of the CHT Peace Accord.

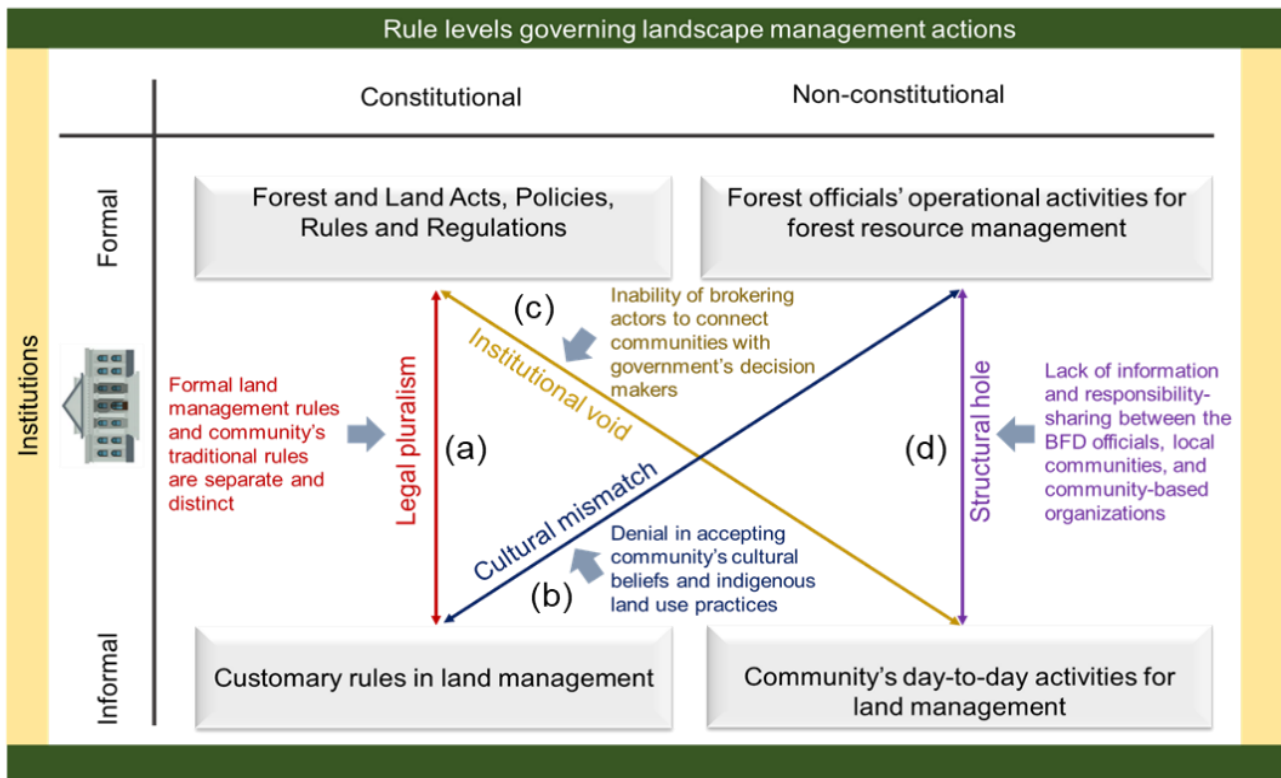
## What can be done?

In restoring forest ecosystem, BFD has a central role in achieving the desired outcomes by engaging with communities in an effective way.

Effective land use planning at the landscape level is necessary, keeping in mind the varied livelihood demands of the local people.

government organizational actors, local communities, and the community-based organizations involved in land management. Finally, a coexisting institutional void has emerged due to formal institutions' inefficiency in communicating the community members about sustainable land and forest management benefits and wildlife rules and regulations and BFD's lack of jurisdictional capacity on forest land (Box 1).

Box 1: Inter-institutional gap in the CHT landscape management



Identification of multiple stakeholders and their levels of influence and interests is very important in developing a successful management model.

Several inter-institutional gaps are co-existing in the CHT which needs to be minimized for sustainable livelihoods and forest conservation. Several critical inter-institutional gaps occur between the formal and informal institutional regimes. Separate and coexisting government land management rules and communities' customary rules has created a coexisting legal pluralism. This gap has created a coexisting cultural mismatch because the government rules define many of the community's cultural beliefs and practices as a violation. A coexisting structural hole has emerged due to a network closure and inadequate knowledge and responsibility-sharing between the

BFD could lead a mutually beneficial pathway to halt and reverse forest cover loss by capitalizing on the social capital of local communities to introduce community forest management in CHT.

## The Way Forward

To mainstream community engagement in community forest management in CHT, analyses of stakeholders, social networks, and institutions involved in resource management suggests for the following policy recommendations:

1. Existing disconnections or conflicts between stakeholders involved in resource management requires comprehensive regional and national dialogue for conflict resolution.

Box 2: Suggested principles for successfully managing common resources (adapted from Ostrom, 1990)

1. The forest area linked to a community needs to have **well defined boundaries**.
2. **Rules should fit local circumstances**, dictated by local people and local ecological needs. Adapting the rules over time according to experience and changing circumstances, should be possible within the community.
3. **Participatory decision-making is vital**. Community members should be involved in drawing up the rules that will govern their behavior, benefit distribution, etc.
4. **The forest must be monitored**. Communities need a way of checking that people are keeping to the rules and that the forest is developing as expected. BFD could play a useful role in informing the community of the status of the forest.
5. **Sanctions for those who break the rules should be graduated**. This means a system of warnings and fines, as well as informal reputational consequences in the community.
6. **Conflict resolution should be easily accessible**. When issues come up, resolving them should be informal, cheap and straightforward. That means that anyone can take their problems for mediation, and nobody is shut out.
7. **The community must have the right to organize themselves** and exert the privileges and responsibilities laid down in the rules, without interference. The rules won't count for anything if a higher local authority doesn't recognize them as legitimate.
8. **Each community forest should be part of a larger network of forest communities**. Some things can be managed locally, but some might need wider regional cooperation and representation.

2. The roles and responsibilities of formal and informal institutional actors in SLM of the CHT need to be refined and clarified.

3. Institutions with high power and high interest (i.e., BFD, community, local administrations) should be at the center of SLM with a focus on redistributing power and closing inter-institutional gaps as revealed in Box 1.

4. Legitimate community-based organizations that currently have high interest, but low formal power should be promoted to enable them to contribute significantly in sustainable management of forest resources.

5. Community based forest management rules for CHT should be developed according to well established principles (see Box 3) to ensure the community is strongly incentivized to ensure the sustainability of the shared natural resources (Pomeroy and Berkes, 1997; Ostrom, 1990).

## References

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