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## Management of Village Common Forests in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: Historical Background and Current Issues in Terms of Sustainability

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### ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the historical management system of village common forests (VCF) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh and observe the current issues related to their sustainability. The study on historical context was based on secondary information to establish the linkages of VCF development and management in the CHT. Field visits to four VCF in the Bandarban Hill Districts were also conducted to cross check the information collected from secondary sources to observe the current status and management pattern of these VCF through semi-structured interviews, group discussion, key-informant interviews and biodiversity assessment. VCF in the CHT undoubtedly play an important role in biodiversity conservation and as well as supporting daily necessities of the community people. We found that VCF still are the source of fuel wood, herbs, roots, bamboo shoots, wild fruits, vines or leaves for cooking or medicinal use necessary to sustain the lives of the indigenous communities in the CHT. Field visits to different VCF show that the VCF are necessarily small in size (57 ha) and around 108 families are dependent on these community managed village forests. A total of 163 plant species from 60 families were also recorded from these VCF including some rare plant and animal species which are not usually found in the reserve forests and the un-classed state forests due to continued deforestation and land degradation. However, population pressure combined with improved marketing facilities, ignorance, over exploitation, personal greed, tenure insecurity, faulty government policies regarding settlement of land and breakdown of the traditional systems exerting pressures on these VCF and the overall condition of these important biodiversity rich areas are degrading or shrinking in size and number gradually. Recognizing the traditional and customary resource rights of the indigenous communities in the CHT, acknowledging resource management system, providing tenure security, encouraging communities through legal and financial incentives in protecting these VCF or any other state owned forest areas solely for the conservation of biodiversity following an intensive management plan, resolving long lasting land related conflicts, and at the same time upholding the spirit of CHT Peace Accord 1997 could be important policy tools for the sustainability of these VCF in the CHT. Lessons learned from this study will be useful in formulating effective policies for community based forest management in Bangladesh and other developing countries.

### KEYWORDS

Common Forests; Community-Based Forest Management; Village Common Forests; Chittagong Hill Tracts; Bangladesh

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