

# *Policy Brief*

## **Eradicate Poverty by 2021**

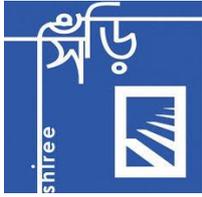
### *Chittagong Hill Districts*



## **Introduction**

Chittagong Hill Tracts is one of the most remote regions of Bangladesh. The three districts in the region, namely, Bandarban, Khagrachori and Rangamati are also among the most sparsely populated districts of Bangladesh. Developing infrastructure to the remote corners of these districts had been a challenge. The districts are also among the most culturally diverse regions of Bangladesh as they are the home of 12 ethnic communities in Bangladesh. Of the ethnic communities there are Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tenchungya, Chak, Pankho, Mru, Murung, Bowm, Lushai, Khyang, and Khumi people, each of them are with distinct linguistic and cultural differences. The region suffered from armed conflicts for nearly 25 years which ended in December 1997 when the Government of Bangladesh signed a peace agreement with the insurgent groups. A UNDP study on Chittagong Hill Tracts (2015) suggests that over 60 percent of the people in these three districts live in absolute poverty (UNDP, 2015). Nearly 43 percent of the forest land of Bangladesh is located in this region. In terms of major threats to health, Malaria is still one of the most pervasive diseases in the region. Access to safe drinking water, electricity, health facilities, markets, schools are low in many parts of the hill regions.

While the government of Bangladesh is committed to completely eradicate extreme poverty from the country by 2021, achieving these goal will require understanding the region specific obstacles to achieving that. It is in this context, EEP/Shiree organized regional level workshops across the country to interact with all stakeholders ranging from the extreme poor themselves to local government personnel. These stakeholder also included key representatives from public administration who are in charge of implementing government policies as well as NGO representatives who have vast experience working in the grass roots combating extreme poverty. The overarching goal of these workshops was to share with the regional stakeholders - the major challenges to overcoming extreme poverty in their respective regions and agreeing upon way forwards that will eventually lead to achieving 'zero extreme poverty'. This paper here summarizes the proceedings from the workshop organized in Bandarban, CHT.



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## **Eradicating extreme poverty: Exploring Local Challenges**

There is certainly a need for region-specific understanding of the extreme poverty. In this context, the challenges faced by the extreme poor of the Chittagong hill districts deserve special policy attention. Unlike main land, these districts are mostly forest land. The pattern of agriculture in these districts is also constrained by cultural specificities. So the policy prescription for Eradication of Extreme Poverty from the hill districts must also be region specification.

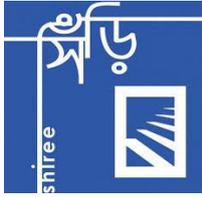
Extreme poverty is present all over the country and there are common actions that are to be undertaken to achieve 'zero extreme poverty'. The general challenges as well as desired actions needed to achieve this goal are well set out in 'Manifesto for the Extreme Poor'. However, naturally there are region specific challenges also that are unique to different regions of the country based on geographic and socio-economic conditions. The stakeholders pointed out (and discussed) on some such region specific challenges (and prospects) to eradicating extreme poverty from CHT. Workshop and our analysis presents the following strategies to eliminate extreme poverty from the region.

### ***Boosting Agricultural Growth***

Hill people have traditionally been involved in slash and burn farming (*jhum* cultivation). Since the British time, this practice was discouraged and the Forest Department of the Government of Bangladesh was very active to put to an end of this practice of cultivation. Over time, however, hill people needed to shift out of this. For this, they need either land rights or to find alternative jobs. As of now, extreme poor households in the hill districts are dependent on *Jhum* farming, orchards, livestock rearing, etc. As the population pressure is growing, these jobs are not providing sufficient income for them. They need to find alternative jobs particularly in agricultural farming which remains a major source of their employment. Studies have shown that mixed farming like MSFO<sup>1</sup> (multi-strata fruit orchard) is very rewarding but it involves initial investment in land. The practice is also a sustainable farming system. To finance initial setup of these farms, hill farmers need access to credit, linkage to markets and technical assistance for managing the farm. This will boost income and employment growth for the poor.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sandeeonline.org/uploads/documents/publication/792\\_PUB\\_policy\\_brief\\_23.pdf](http://www.sandeeonline.org/uploads/documents/publication/792_PUB_policy_brief_23.pdf)



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#### ***Ensuring Financial Inclusion***

A major factor working behind CHT residents failing to uplift their socio-economic conditions is the lack of access to financial services. Only 6 percent of all CHT households seek formal saving services. This ratio is even lower for ethnic households (4 percent). The overall coverage of formal micro credit is also low in CHT, it is highest in Rangamati which is only 4 percent. Because of not having proper access to finance, the extreme poor households when having to cope with a financial shock usually resort to certain strategies such as- going for less expensive food (possible malnutrition), borrowing food or purchasing on credit (credit burden), consuming seed stock (decreasing food security), cutting down consumption (possible malnutrition) etc. All of this leads to further weakening of the condition of a poor household getting it caught in the vicious cycle. One solution to this problem may be the promotion of community based financial institutions. Green Hill (an EEP/Shiree partner) has undertaken one such intervention titled VLSA which appears to have left significant positive impact.

#### ***Access to Healthcare Services***

Health care is a major problem in remote hill locations. Once an active member of the family suffers from diseases, it drains into assets and income of the households. The result is that poor households are trapped into a vicious cycle. Recovery period from ill-health for indigenous groups in CHT is longer than national average. Other health related indicators show similar pictures. For example, anemia prevalence among children and adolescents, malaria related deaths among women and children etc. Therefore, improving access to basic health-care in remote locations is a very important strategy to eliminate extreme poverty from the region.

#### ***Access to Education***

Education is the source of future wealth for all households. To eliminate poverty, education holds a key in the future. However, hill regions have very low access to education. Remoteness, distance, road conditions, etc., often prevents hill children from continuing education. In addition to this, quality of education provided in many of these institutions is not very good due to absence of trained teachers and quality of facilities. Many hill communities also cannot use their own language to study. Investment in educational infrastructure including using multi-mode interactive



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teaching (combining internet and school) is required to ensure that hill people in remote locations get similar access to education as in the plain land.

#### ***Needs of the Vulnerable Groups***

Poor people are more vulnerable than others due to their low access to public facilities. However, it is also true that there are physically challenged people in many of these poor households. Both physically challenged groups, pregnant women, old people remain confined to their houses. Their access to public facilities like health care facilities, markets, education remains very limited. In addition, active members of many of the extreme poor households migrate outside to seek employment leaving children and other family members in the hills, who are also vulnerable discrimination and crimes.

#### **Policies for eliminating extreme poverty**

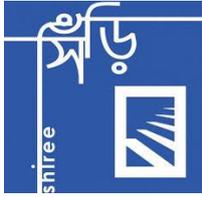
The 'Manifesto for the Extreme Poor' has identified 6 key issues that keep people in extreme poverty. While the document also presents a general set of way forwards regarding how to address these issues; in the regional workshop organized at Bandarban, participants themselves put forward recommendations from regional point of views.

#### ***Investment in income generation, health and education infrastructure***

There is need to ensure and monitor the on-going investment in education and health infrastructure by the local communities. Many of the existing programs are not transparent to the community and hence there is a chance of leakage. Local communities should remain informed about government and NGO led programs on education and health care facilities.

#### ***Improving access to Public Services and Transfers***

Similarly, information on income generation programs and projects shall be made public through web-portal, public bill boards, schools, and local government offices in order to ensure that poor people can access to such programs and projects. A database of recipients of public services along with national ID should be made public in order to ensure transparency and accountability of such programs. In addition there are many transfer payments from the government in terms of reliefs, rations, pensions, etc. Database must also include names and related information on them so



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that the real poor get benefits from this. In this connection, holding town-hall type meetings for select the beneficiary could be used at the local level.

In short, the policy suggestions for Eradicating Extreme Poverty from Chittagong Hill Tracts can be as follows:

- Mixed farming like multi-strata fruit orchard can be an attractive option which can be source of alternative jobs. The existing development programs of both government and NGO must be well monitored to provide necessary transparency for avoiding leakages.
- An appropriate data based must be prepared to let people know about the availability of public services and transfers