



International
Labour
Organization



Building capacities on indigenous and tribal peoples' issues in Bangladesh

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Cover photography: Sarah Jane Saltmarsh

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FOREWORD

Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ITPs), with their distinct languages, traditions, cultures, values, and customs, contribute significantly to the rich cultural heritage, ecology, and sustainable development of Bangladesh. Yet as in many other countries, they face challenges relating to their socio-economic development and for their rights to be fully recognized.

The “Building Capacities of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples’ Issues in Bangladesh: Rights and Good Practices” project was launched by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2009 with support from the Royal Danish Embassy in Dhaka and direct partnership with the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs. The UNDP-Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility supported the aims of the ILO project within the same period.

Since it commenced, the project has helped strengthen the institutional capacity of the Government of Bangladesh and ITPs to support the integration of ITPs rights into the national legal and policy environment, in line with relevant national and international standards and policies. The project has also facilitated national level policy advocacy through the Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples.

The project has collaborated closely with both the government and ITPs as it sought to promote ITPs rights, based on ILO’s institutional mandate. It has delivered a number of impressive results over a short period of time, many of which are detailed in this publication. Advocates and supporters including ministers, parliamentarians, intellectuals and human rights institutions as well as ITPs themselves all emphasize the importance of sustaining the momentum created through the project, if progress made is to be consolidated and built upon.

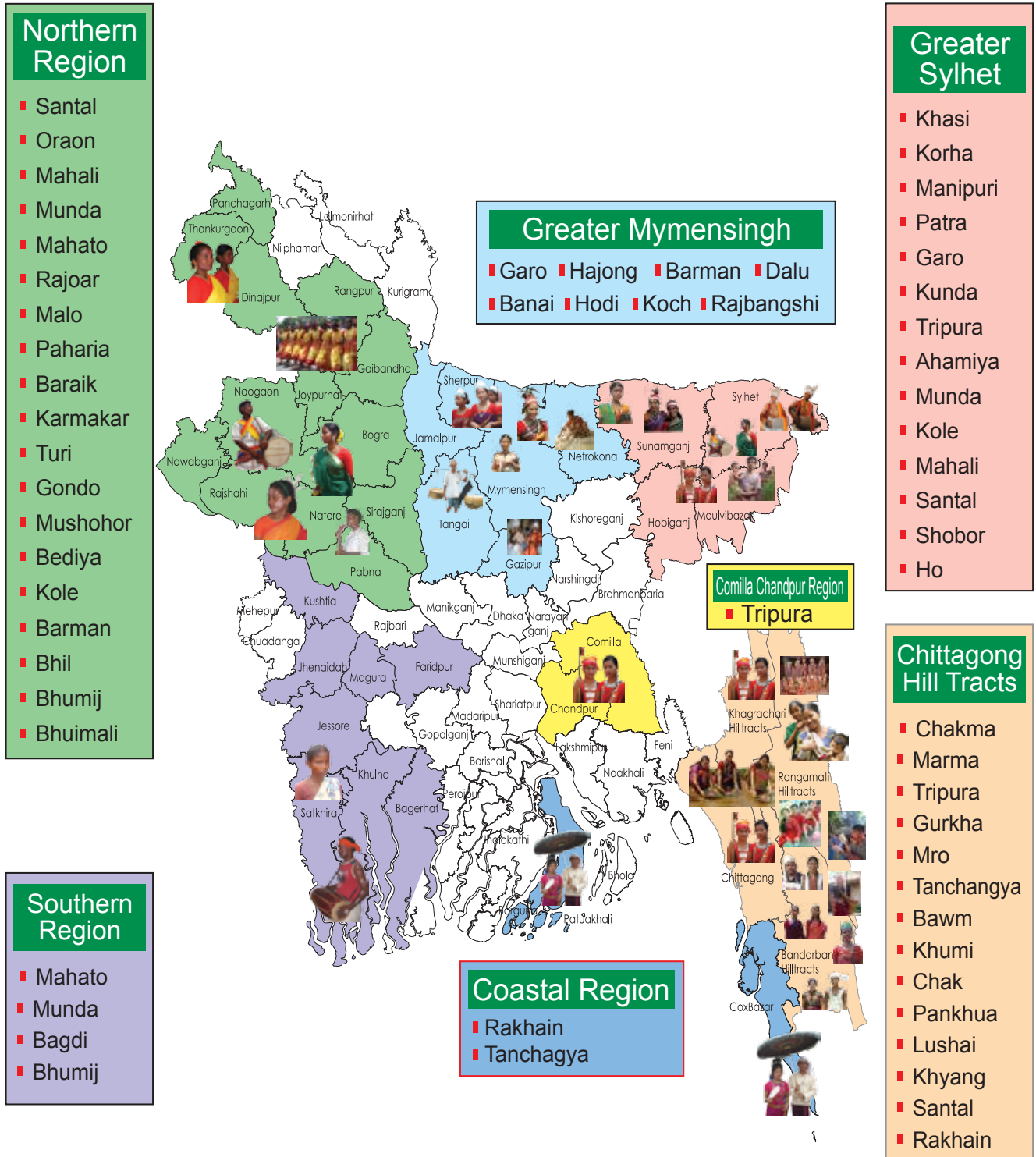
Many changes have taken place in recent years that indicate a brighter future for ITPs in Bangladesh yet much still remains to be done. ILO will continue to provide support in this area while at the same time encouraging the government to fully implement policies and agreements that have been signed relating to them.

This brochure contains information about ILO’s activities in this area. We focus on the stories of change makers from across Bangladesh who are working for the rights of ITPs. Through their words, we hope to share insights into what the project has actually meant, for people, for policy and for progress.



Srinivas B. Reddy
Country Director

The indigenous and tribal peoples of Bangladesh



বাংলাদেশে ৪৬ টির অধিক আদিবাসী জাতিগোষ্ঠীর বসবাস

Source : Kapaeeng Foundation

An indigenous view of Bangladesh

Bangladesh has an extremely diverse population, with at least 45 different ethnicities that can be called indigenous, according to the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum. Meanwhile a survey on multilingual education conducted by the Research and Development Collective and published by UNESCO, found that education is being carried out in 43 distinct languages other than Bangla.

The indigenous and tribal population, according to the 2011 Census, consists of 1,586,141 people, or 1.8 percent of the total population of the country. Some 80 percent of the indigenous and tribal population live in the plain land districts, bordering India, in the north and east of the country and the rest live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, bordering Myanmar, in the south east of the country. Indigenous and tribal groups in Bangladesh are predominantly Buddhist, Hindu, Christian or practice animism.

Indigenous and tribal people are referred to by many names in Bangladesh. The most common is *adivasis*, a word not confined by any particular geographical or political boundaries but generally used in the Indian subcontinent to denote indigenous peoples. Meanwhile, the Government of Bangladesh uses the term 'Small Ethnic populations'. For its part, ILO follows its Conventions No. 107 and 169, and uses the term 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples'. While all of the indigenous and tribal groups in Bangladesh possess their own cultures, ways of life, traditions and customary laws, all groups share major ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic distinctions from the majority Bengalis.



Photo: Sarah Jane Saltmarsh



Supporting vulnerable and marginalized communities

The 45 or more indigenous and tribal communities in Bangladesh are some of the most vulnerable and marginalized communities in the country. This is due to a wide variety of reasons, including a continuing loss of land and natural resources, language and culture, and a lack of access to quality public services. A lack of clarity surrounding the different terms used to describe ITPs and little reliable socio-economic data compounds issues.

When the current government came to power in 2008, it committed itself to fully implementing the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord and ensuring the rights of ITPs in Bangladesh. The ILO saw this positive stance as an opportune time to promote and institutionalize indigenous and tribal peoples' rights in Bangladesh, in line with Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention 107 which Bangladesh ratified in 1972, and the updated ILO Convention 169: Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, which Bangladesh is yet to ratify.

The ***Building Capacities on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Issues in Bangladesh: Rights and Good Practices*** project was subsequently launched in 2009, with support from the Royal Danish Embassy in Dhaka and in direct partnership with the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs. UNDP implemented the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility within the same period, which supported the aims of the ILO project. Both projects worked to accelerate similar national level policy advocacy goals. Since 2016 ILO's actions to support indigenous and tribal peoples have been supported by Sweden.

The potential for the ILO Conventions as a basis for socio-economic development has only begun to gain momentum recently. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord recognized the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a semi-autonomous tribal region and provided a framework for the development of indigenous peoples in those areas. It has however, yet to be fully implemented.

The wheels have been set in motion for improving the rights of Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh, but there is still a long way to go. Significant progress has been made in a number of areas, including inclusion of indigenous issues in the national political agenda. As evidence of this increased representation of indigenous peoples and commitment to improving the issues of indigenous communities can now be seen from the union parishad (sub-district) to the national level.

The ILO and indigenous and tribal peoples

Indigenous and tribal peoples have their own cultures, ways of life, traditions and customary laws. Throughout history however, lack of respect for these has led to social conflict and bloodshed in far too many cases around the world. The ILO has been working with indigenous and tribal peoples since the 1920s. It is responsible for the only international instruments currently in force that deal exclusively with the rights of these peoples.

ILO work in the field of indigenous and tribal peoples falls mainly into two categories: adoption and supervision of standards; and assistance to indigenous and tribal peoples and to States. Today, the international community has accepted that the cultures of indigenous and tribal peoples are valuable and need to be respected and protected, and that indigenous and tribal peoples should participate in decision-making processes in the countries in which they live.

ILO Conventions relating to indigenous and tribal peoples

Conventions are legally binding international treaties that may be ratified by member states of the ILO.

Convention 169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989

Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries

Entry into force: 5 Sep 1991

Status: Up-to-date instrument

Convention 169 is the foremost international legal instrument that deals specifically with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, and its influence extends beyond the number of actual ratifications. It is yet to be ratified by the Government of Bangladesh.

Convention 107 - Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957

Convention concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries

Entry into force: 2 Jun 1959

Status: Outdated instrument

Convention 107 has been in force for Bangladesh since 1972. However, the instrument is now considered outdated and the ILO encourages countries for which it remains in force to consider ratifying Convention 169.

Key objectives and results

The primary objective of the Building Capacities on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Issues in Bangladesh: Rights and Good Practices project was to strengthen the capacity of the Government of Bangladesh and indigenous peoples' organisations to protect and promote indigenous peoples' rights as guaranteed under ILO Conventions.

The project had three key objectives:

- **Stakeholders at national and local levels have a clear understanding of the provisions and application of indigenous peoples' rights in the context of Bangladesh**

This resulted, directly and indirectly, in the creation of an informed coalition, direct access to government services for indigenous peoples, better interpretation of policies and laws, observance of international and national cultural days, strengthened international networks and experience, and strong community level indigenous peoples' organisations.

- **Indigenous peoples' rights, as enshrined in ILO Convention 169, are included in national legislation and policies**

This resulted, directly and indirectly, in the creation of a movement for ratification that was strongly supported by the media, constitutional amendment, drafting of the first Act for indigenous peoples and the building of a knowledge base on indigenous peoples' issues.

- **Mechanisms for effective coordination and monitoring of the implementation of indigenous peoples rights are in place**

This resulted, directly and indirectly, in the development of a parliamentary body representing indigenous peoples, seats at the policy table, effective emergency response and grassroots connections.

Indigenous organisations were empowered to lobby for their rights in a coordinated, strategic manner. Government and law enforcement officials were informed about the rights of indigenous people, and that ensuring them is a duty, but also that indigenous people can make significant social and economic contributions. Information was shared with all parties about the different legal and other systems that exist within their communities and institutions, allowing them to speak in a common language and identify for themselves where they can benefit from working together.



Photo: Sarah Jane Saltmarsh

The project approach had two key elements. The first was central to the ILO mandate; bringing groups that do not have strong traditions of working together, to a single platform and providing strategic technical advice to assist them to collaborate. The key parties involved in this approach were the government, protection forces and indigenous peoples.

The second was integral to sustainability and effective implementation; working with those three groups from the policy to the grassroots level. This involved participants from the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh (Union Parishads), district officials, community level indigenous organizations, national lawmakers, government ministers and national representative bodies.

The ILO's overall, long-term objective is to encourage the Government of Bangladesh to ratify ILO Convention 169, because the previously ratified ILO Convention 107 was superseded. While ratification was not achieved within the project timeline, a platform for ratification, and for implementing the Convention once ratified, was started. Indigenous rights are a complex issue, so it is expected that progress will be slow, but the basis of action must be legislation, which enshrines the rights of indigenous peoples as the ultimate goal of policy, and puts measures into place for this purpose.

Objective 1

Stakeholders at national and local levels have a clear understanding of the provisions and application of indigenous peoples' rights in the context of Bangladesh

Building an informed coalition

The project is possibly the first initiative through which government officials in Bangladesh have received information on the rights of indigenous peoples, their development concerns and cultural heritage. In all, 665 indigenous and non-indigenous community leaders as well as officials from government and law enforcement agencies, were trained on indigenous peoples' rights and issues.

By bringing the groups together as participants and reducing the inherent, historical power differences between them, each of the groups, for the first time, had a chance to express their concerns in neutral, constructive discussions.

"We were introduced formally to elected members, chairmen and forest department officials through ILO events. They began to understand about our work and what we are doing and allowed us to discuss issues. In the beginning, we would only go to government departments in a group of 2-3 people, but now we go alone."

"Before the seminars, many people in Madhupur avoided officers and government officials. Many cases did not make it to government desks. When we started participating in events that brought government officials and Indigenous peoples together, we introduced ourselves and they also did. We were both, even for a short time, just people living and working in the same area. Later on when we met them outside the events they greeted us and asked us how we were, just simple gestures."

"The space between us is slowly reducing. It is helping both of us, just knowing each other. When we want to discuss issues with them now, officials are starting to give us the space to do that."

Sulekha Mrong, Executive Director, Achik Michik Society

"From a government perspective, learning about laws related to the Chittagong Hill Tracts is very important for all officials. We have three separate government institutes in the hill tracts, so this training also acts as a platform to exchange views. Government officials are always transferring, so new officers do not know about CHT laws, etc. All levels of officials need to participate in this sort of training and be aware of the rules, regulations, conventions, and how to apply them."

Manik Lal Banik, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs

The impact of increased social dialogue at ground level is strong. In some cases, government officials and indigenous peoples are not just talking to each other; they are working together too.

"We are working in favour of the government and assisting them now. For example, the Right to Information law is being published and disseminated by us in our area, which is actually a government responsibility. The government recognizes and appreciates our work and respects our recommendations."

Eugene Nokrek, Chairperson, Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad

The platforms established through sensitisation processes created an unprecedented opportunity to train all groups involved on human rights, national and international policies as well as ILO and UN conventions. All groups reported overall positive outcomes, and a desire to participate in similar events in the future.

"One of the changes that has given people the most relief has been a marked reduction in the filing of false cases. The mentality has really improved. Government high officials have put pressure on the local government to follow the rules. Ten years ago, the Forest Department would not want to meet or speak with us. It was impossible. Now, they come to us. Even the Divisional Forest Officer comes to meet us. When we invite government officials to our area, to share information with them or to organize a workshop or seminar, they always come. When they want to take decisions, they invite us to participate."

"When a primary school teacher was killed on a bus by some miscreants, we formed a human chain and demanded justice. The police came and took our information and filed a case in the police station. The case went to court afterwards."

Eugene Nokrek, Chairperson, Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad



Hon. Advisor to PM Mr. Gowher Rizvi hands over a certificate to a training participant



From indifference to interest

An increased awareness of the international instruments on ITPs rights, and the application of them in the Bangladesh context, led to indigenous peoples directly accessing government offices and government officials taking action on their issues. In many areas, this was the first time that ITPs had approached government offices without fear.

"The support from the ILO helped us to understand that there were local level services available for Indigenous peoples. With this information, we consulted different administration bodies. In the beginning, they did not want to listen to us. We did not leave their doors though, we continued to consult them, applied for their services using their criteria, and gradually they listened to us. It took us about a year to get ration cards. Five years ago, the people who are receiving services now were not eligible – not because they were actually ineligible, but just because government officers did not know about them and there were no examples of their application in indigenous communities. Now we have a separate standing committee for indigenous peoples and the list that is used to determine who receives benefits was created by us."

Sulekha Mrong, Executive Director, Achik Michik Society

Space for understanding

An equally important impact of the increased understanding of ITPs rights was the correct interpretation of policy by policy makers and rights holders.

“The policies and laws for indigenous peoples are good. The challenge is who is handling them, how they are explaining them and whom they are explaining them to. If they explained laws in the right way to all the people who should know about them, there would not be any problems. Prior to these workshops, there was a lot more space for distorting information and government circulars. There is less space for that now, because we just understand more.”

“When we organise training at our level, government officials now come. Sometimes we have to invite them several times, but they come. When we explain about our rights, they try to understand from our perspective. What has changed is that now it is not only us going to government officials; they are coming to us. There has always been an unequal relationship. The training is helping to put us on the same page, when it was not even the same book before.”

Sulekha Mrong, Executive Director, Achik Michik Society

The importance of equipping the next generation with the skills to continue building on present successes was not overlooked. The project focused on providing a holistic, hands-on experience to young indigenous rights advocates, through creating five internships. Interns were assigned to assist project staff in preparing documents, organizing meetings, seminars, workshops and training for different key stakeholders. The five interns belonged to the Garo, Chakma, Santal and Hajong communities. They were briefed ILO procedures, mechanisms, labour standards, conventions and policies for indigenous and tribal peoples. The interns developed their skills through the internships and graduated into full time jobs in organisations such as Oxfam, Kapaeeng Foundation, UNDP and Solidarity International.

The importance of being part of the international solidarity movement on ITPs issues was made a priority. Community-level indigenous organisations were supported to observe five national, international and cultural days.

"We have organizational meetings, seminars, celebrations – we celebrate Mothers Day, Women's Day and World Indigenous Day now. We are always invited to welcome government high officials, MPs and ministers when they come to our area or sub district. We are using this opportunity now to request government officials to not only invite our cultural team to perform but also saying that they have to invite and listen to our rights team as well. They have now made some commitments to do that. Officials recently attended a celebration in Modhupur, were present at a public meeting, and they also came to our Wangala (Thanksgiving) celebration. They even spoke on August 9 at National Indigenous Day, committing to helping us preserve our culture. They are interested to learn much more about our culture now. They ask us when we are going to have our next cultural event or celebration. They expect us to invite them. They show us respect and they are starting to treat our culture like it is a good one."

Sulekha Mrong, Executive Director, Achik Michik Society

The light at the end of the tunnel

In parallel to the work being done to build capacity and sensitize stakeholders at the individual and community levels, international study tours were organised for national policy makers. These gave parliamentarians direct experience with national policy agendas that included indigenous rights. The visits were significant in a number of ways. Firstly, members had a direct opportunity to see what an indigenous people's rights act looked like, and what that meant for that society. They saw that it was possible and that the result at the end was worth striving for.



"These trips are extremely helpful. Parliamentarians learn a lot. People would never understand about the Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples from simply reading our documents. They would not get the true story without talking to me or other actors. Visits help parliamentarians to understand the importance of their work as caucus members. Indigenous rights are a global issue and unless people go and visit other countries, they cannot see that. Learning that the Indigenous People's Rights Act was passed in the Philippines really strengthened the resolve of our members."

Professor Mesbah Kamal, Coordinator, Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples and Secretary General, National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples



Indigenous people advocates from Bangladesh meet their counterparts from Indonesia

Secondly, members could learn how change was achieved first-hand, from the people who made it happen. They learnt about the published and the non-published processes, and the specific internal and external environments that needed to be built.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, sharing experiences built confidence and international support networks. Tours gave members the conviction that they would need to persist through the inevitably lengthy administrative processes ahead, and start building a coalition who could continually support the process.

“The Building Capacities on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Issues in Bangladesh project was the first donor-supported initiative to conduct a series of training sessions including government officials from a range of ministries and departments. This is possibly the first initiative that provided any government official in Bangladesh with training and orientation on indigenous peoples, their development concerns and their cultural heritage.”

Ashish Kumar Barua
Member (Planning), CHT Development Board, Rangamati District

"I suggest that government officials should visit the Philippines, Indonesia, and other countries to exchange views and see how government officials in a similar capacity are working. We need to see what practices are better, what should be adopted, what could be applicable for this country."

Md. Kamal Uddin Talukdar, Additional Secretary, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs

Ground-up strength

Awareness of rights is undoubtedly a critical achievement, however it is the first step in a long process. It is key to then ensure that people know how to exercise those rights; how to mobilise others to build consensus around an issue and take the concrete actions needed to see impact. Even though their voices were loud in the activism space, community level indigenous organisations were often not presenting as a united front and were not aware of the processes needed to follow through on issues. Topography and linguistic and cultural diversity exacerbated these issues. The ILO took a hands-on approach to building capacity, through involving the organisations in project decisions and ensuring their representation in project events.

"Earlier the government would give out information to different groups and whenever we called any meeting or any kind of gathering, it was not focused. Now you can see that, whatever we are doing, many people are coming to our programmes and events. They are getting a positive picture of our concepts and our rights. We have a very good network now. Our organisational strength has improved - we have communications from Sylhet to Chittagong, to Mymensingh. We also have inter-organisational communication. We are getting information on where human rights violations are occurring and how people are reacting. We can take action and demand justice in one voice."

Flora Bably Talang, Headman Punjee Montri, General Secretary, Kulaura, Juri, Borolekha and Raznagar upazilas Inter Punji Development Association of Khasi people



Objective 2

Indigenous peoples' rights, as enshrined in ILO Convention 169, are included in national legislation and policies

Building a movement for ratification

There are few laws that directly or indirectly address indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. Those which do exist are not applicable to the indigenous peoples living outside of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Five major acts of the partially autonomous Chittagong Hill Tracts region address rights, in addition to the region's customary laws on family and resource rights. Outside of the CHT however, one provision in the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (1950) restricts selling lands belonging to "aboriginal castes and tribes" to anyone other than aboriginal castes and tribes domiciled in Bangladesh.

The Government of Bangladesh has not ratified ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples as yet, but a strong and diverse movement has been built through a series of workshops, seminars and dialogue to create better awareness around the importance of indigenous issues.

Progress to date includes:

- Recommendation in the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-2015) to ratify ILO Convention 169
- Recommendation in the Universal Periodic Review Report 2013 by the Bangladesh Government to ratify ILO Convention 169
- Inclusion of ILO Convention 169 in the Strategic Framework of the National Human Rights Commission
- Support for ILO Convention 169 expressed by ministries in public meetings
- Inclusion of the languages and cultures of indigenous and small ethnic groups in the 2010 National Education Policy
- Formation of the Inter Ministerial Advisory Committee and institutional Focal Points in targeted Ministries
- Ratification of ILO Convention 169 has become a key demand of Indigenous Peoples Organizations

“Indigenous issues are now on the national agenda, in all the national and mainstream media everyday and sometimes in the headlines. The adivasi (indigenous) movement has definitely progressed. Once it is in the national agenda, there has to be some action. This awareness has to be translated into policy action. Some actions are being taken but we have to strive for more.”

Professor Mesbah Kamal, Coordinator, Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples and Secretary General, National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples

Constitutional amendment

A contentious policy issue has been the inclusion of ITPs in the national constitution. In 2014, Article 23A was introduced through a constitutional amendment, which, for the first time in Bangladesh's history, mentioned the existence of the 'unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities'. The amendment has caused a division in indigenous peoples. For many, it was seen as a major achievement, the first time that ITPs have been included in the constitution.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Dispute Resolution Commission (amendment) Act 2013 also attracted controversy. A land commission was supposed to be developed under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord which was to function on the basis of the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Act. This however, contradicted the Peace Accord on a number of grounds, and faced opposition from a number of groups. The government subsequently reviewed a 13-point amendment proposal, incorporating ten points from it in the final draft of the Amendment Bill 2013.

The first Act for indigenous peoples

There is not one comprehensive piece of legislation that specifically protects the rights of ITPs in Bangladesh. To rectify this, the Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples' Rights drafted the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act in 2014. Not only was it the first act of its kind ever drafted in Bangladesh, but it was also the first ever attempt to seek public opinion on a proposed bill or act in the country. The draft was endorsed by all indigenous organizations, in the most comprehensive consultation process that has ever been undertaken in the country for a piece of legislation.



Photo: Sarah Jane Saltmarsh

Building a knowledge base

To ensure that decision makers and ITPs institutions are correctly informed about the rights of indigenous peoples, two studies were reviewed and updated by the ILO. These were made available for organisations to reference when developing programmes for indigenous peoples. The two studies were on the working conditions of tea plantation workers and urban migrant indigenous and tribal peoples. Both studies recommended addressing the working conditions of urban indigenous and tribal workers and highlighted their lack of capacity to exercise their rights to form unions, and the need to enhance their knowledge on labour laws, human rights, and international labour standards. In all, 26 seminars were subsequently organized, at national and regional levels, to sensitise a wide variety of stakeholders on indigenous peoples' issues.

"Women like me have learnt a lot about our rights and freedoms, after the signing of the Peace Accord and then through ILO seminars. It is not simply that we have learnt, we are now practicing this in our homes. Earlier, my husband would question me if I came home late, I would have to give an explanation every time I left. Now I say that I have rights and responsibilities and I do not always have to explain. Whatever knowledge I am gathering, I am also trying to help out other women. About 15 women in my village get together regularly and whatever training we receive from ILO, whatever we have discussed, we share the information with each other."

Shantona Kisha, Naniarchor Karbari, Chittagong Hill Tracts

Objective 3

Mechanisms for effective coordination and monitoring of the implementation of indigenous people's rights are in place

A parliamentary body representing indigenous peoples

At a national level, the development of the Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Affairs, a parliamentary body that represents ITPs, has undoubtedly been one of the most significant achievements for ITPs over the past five years. The ILO supported the caucus technically and conceptually.

The development of the caucus was a watershed moment; for the first time in history, a platform was created that brought ITPs leaders, legislators and government officials on multiple levels together to pursue a common policy agenda. It was public recognition that ITPs rights are a national, not a regional issue. The caucus now consists of 42 members, of which four are women and eight are ministers.

The creation of the caucus has two distinct advantages in terms of coordination and monitoring.

- Seats at the policy table

The caucus is a platform to pursue public policy at the highest level. Through sensitisation and training, ITPs are increasingly aware of and starting to exercise their rights. The caucus provides an endpoint for that capacity building, a way to coordinate the concerns of people on the ground and bring them to policy tables.

"Young indigenous peoples are leaving Bangladesh. What the caucus has been trying to put across is that this is their country. They are the sons and daughters of this soil, and they must speak up. They are inspired when they see their issues being discussed in parliament. The caucus has introduced the issue of allocation for both the hills and plain lands people in parliament. 30 MPs raised the issue. This has never happened before. The allocation for the development of the people in the plain lands was roughly 16 crore, amounting to about 80 taka per person per year. This was recently raised slightly, to roughly 20 crore. The allocation for Bengalis is about 22,000 taka per capita. Now that we are presenting these facts in the parliament, parliamentarians are looking at them."

Professor Mesbah Kamal, Coordinator, Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples and Secretary General, National Coalition for Indigenous Peoples.



A workshop to mark Indigenous Peoples Day brings together members of the indigenous communities, government and development partners.

- Effective emergency response

The second major strength of the caucus is that it has created a platform to raise severe rights violations immediately, at the highest level in the country. This has resulted in emergency responses, at the directive of the highest-level law enforcement authority, to rights violation incidents in Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari.

"The ILO conventions have been useful to us because they have helped us to establish that the Bengali population has its own culture and heritage, and all our groups have their own culture and heritage. The Conventions help us preserve ours, keep it intact, side by side with the dominant culture, but not simply merging with it. An example of this is that Convention 107 says we have the right to educate indigenous children in their mother tongue. ILO 169 has not been ratified yet, but it will help us achieve equal rights, with everybody, including all the other minority groups."

Shanti Bijoy Chakma, Headman, Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts

Grassroots connections

In parallel, an increased awareness of rights among both ITPs and government officials at the ground level has removed some of the ambiguity and reduced the long prevailing climate of uncertainty and fear.

“We did not have a lot of interaction with government earlier. Our headmen were working individually and we were only getting government information through our own channels. There is a lot more sharing of information now, which has happened because of the support of the ILO, UNDP, etc. There were a lot of organizations that were part of this but the ILO played the major role in getting us to interact.”

Premlala Chakma, Headman, Chittagong Hill Tracts

Timeline

- 1972 Ratification of ILO Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations
- 1997 Signing of Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord
- 2009 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper released with comprehensive section on indigenous and tribal peoples
- 2009 Pilot phase of ILO project ‘Building Capacities of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples’ in Bangladesh: Rights and Good Practices’ begins
- 2010 Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples established
- 2010 National Education Policy accepts multilingual education
- 2011 Findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights released Sixth Five Year Plan released with comprehensive section on indigenous and tribal peoples
- 2013 Universal Periodic Review Report 2013 reiterates need to ratify ILO Convention 169 CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act 2013 (amendment) draft accepted by Parliament
- 2014 15th amendment of the Constitution: Article 23A added which uses the terms tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities’. Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act 2014 presented.



Teaching and sharing for the future

It is a warm afternoon, the air is still and everyone has just come back after lunch, so it is the worst time for concentration. There are no interruptions though – students file in and the lesson starts immediately. Even though the mud school has only one classroom and there is another class also starting on the other side, the concentration of the students on their sentence construction feels like we are in a Harvard lecture. They have someone to look up to – their teacher is Jasinta Nokrek.

Jasinta, in her traditionally styled brilliant pink saree, is a mother, teacher and the Vice Chairperson of the Union Parishad (the smallest unit of local government in Bangladesh). She came into power with over 50,000 votes, meaning that her supporters outnumbered the entire ITPs community in that area three times over.

She took a precious few minutes out of the classroom to speak about the last five years.

“I received a lot of training on ILO conventions, national laws and Garo customary laws through my involvement in the AchikMichik Society. After each session, I shared what I learnt with the members of our 19 branches. I motivated and united them. We had a bit of information about our rights before, but we definitely understand them now – and we know how to use them.”

Photo: Sarah Jane Saltmarsh



Jasinta Nokrek
School teacher and General Secretary, Achik Michik Society



Photo: Sarah Jane Saltmarsh

Jasinta in her classroom

The last five years have been busy, according to Jasinta, and productive. There have been a lot of changes for indigenous peoples in Madhupur. According to her, there is still a long way to go though, and a lot more support needed, especially to work with the government.

"We have achieved a lot. We have organized many meetings, seminars, movements, rallies and human chains and raised our voices on many problems. We have solved a lot of issues at our level, but we need more support to continue these activities. There are some problems that require external support, such as deepening our dialogue with the government."

Jasinta's hopes are not for the current generation, but for the next one;

"If young people listen to what we have learnt, if they listen to what we teach then, than they will be good people. They will be bigger people than us."

The students started calling her name and it was back to the classroom. After class, the work would not stop – she would have political duties and house duties to complete. Jasinta left with a smile though, and not a hint of tiredness – just a calm recitation of a Garo proverb -

"Chanchi Chabo, je chaba riengbo shal napna skhang nokkona shokbabo"

(When you eat, don't eat everything at once. Think of your future, in a planned way. Wherever you go, come back to your house before sunset.)



Indigenous people learning new skills

Reports and publications

Survey reveals need for skills and employment support for Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ITPs)

A pressing need exists to create more productive employment opportunities among Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ITPs) in Bangladesh according to a survey held in 2016. The 'Skill and Employment Baseline Assessment of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Bangladesh' was carried out by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) with the support of the International Labour Organization.

Study highlights need to enhance access for ITPs to government jobs

A study has highlighted how job reservation policies could be adjusted to help more ITPs secure government jobs in Bangladesh. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the reservation or 'quota' policy of the Government for the recruitment of ITPs in government service and the status of its implementation.

A Study on Working Conditions of Tea Plantation Workers in Bangladesh

A study on Working Conditions of Tea Plantation Workers in Bangladesh was conducted to generate knowledge and evidence on their working conditions. The findings will be useful in order to identify issues and implement appropriate responses to ensure that tea plantation workers fully enjoy fundamental principles and rights at work, safe working conditions and fair remuneration, without discrimination based on ethnicity, identity, social origin, disability or other grounds.

Working Conditions of Indigenous and Tribal Workers in Bangladesh's Urban Economy: A Focus on the Garment Industry and Beauty Parlours

This study focuses on working conditions of workers originating from indigenous and tribal populations in Bangladesh's urban economy particularly in the garment and beauty parlour industries. The objective of the study was to contribute to ensuring the rights of workers of ITP origin in terms of fundamental principles, ILO conventions on indigenous and tribal peoples and asper decent work.

For more information see: www.ilo.org/dhaka

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