Report back from 1st round of local Focus group discussions and KIIs – for core guiding groups

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# Objectives

The focus group discussions were organized primarily to collect data on the perception of forest stakeholders (Forest Department officials, NGOs, forest-dependent communities) of accountability, transparency and integrity issues in the forestry sector, this to inform upcoming REDD+ activities. Secondary objectives were to confirm some data received through online survey and personal interview and raising awareness on combating deforestation and upcoming REDD+ at the community level.

# Principles and methodology

Key informants interviews (KII) and focus groups discussions were organized in Modhupur and Sreemongol. This process was guided by the UNDP country office with support by the Forest Department and the USAID-funded CREL (Climate resilience ecosystems and livelihoods) project.

For the KIIs, a semi structured interview questionnaire was followed and is in Annex 1.

For the FDG, a semi-structured methodology was prepared, asking the participants to reflect sequentially on 1) the main direct drivers of deforestation and forest degradation 2) their underlying, governance causes 3) their direct experience with governance and anti-corruption issues and 4) their recommendations to address them. The facilitation process was guided by the following principles:

* *Confidentiality*: while the names of the participants were known to the organizers, no comment reported below is attributed
* *Openness*: ensuring that participants from a certain group/industry would talk without fear of retribution by authorities, when present
* *Equality*: facilitator ensured that all participants participated equally
* *Constructiveness:* participants were encouraged to think about solutions rather than issues
* *Specificity*: participants were encouraged to be as specific as possible in the risks they reported and solutions they recommended.
* *Gender balance:* when selecting participants, attention was paid to ensuring that a representative number of women be included. Although this proved impossible for sawmill, timber trade and furniture industries, which are very male-dominated, forest-dependent communities focus group discussions included women (10% in Modhupur, 60 % in Sreemongol).
* *Triangulation of findings*

To protect sensitivity f information and confidentiality, summaries of FGD and KII are only available upon request to the UNDP Bangladesh office[[1]](#footnote-1).

# Summaries

## 4.1 Modhupur

Two FGDs (1. sawmill owners, timber traders and furniture makers and 2. Forest-dependent communities, including 2 (10 %) women) and three KII (Media, Indigenous rights activist, Assistant Conservator of Forests) were conducted in Modhupur.

### Context

##### Trends

Modhupur is a reserve forest: all timber and NTFP is illegal unless authorizations are provided by the FD. According to some account, only 9,000 ha of forest remain out of an estimated 43,000 ha.

Overpopulation, poverty, and lack of alternative livelihoods and basic demand for fuel wood, forest fires, illegal logging caused by demand for timber by sawmills and brick fields were all spontaneously identified as the leading causes.

Actors

Forest-dependent communities of the Garo people are known as valuing forests in their traditional culture. There seems to be a well-rooted awareness and concerns about degradation and degradation, with stakeholders have linked directly to decreased availability of food for people and food and habitat for wildlife leading to loss; loss of traditional culture; a change in local climate patterns ; a decrease in the availability of medicinal plants; and soil erosion. The introduction of non-endemic species due to social forestry programmes is also seen as having destroyed the landscape, led to loss of biodiversity and decreased habitat for wildlife.

Local “thugs”, reportedly paid by sawmill owners or timber traders, are said to threaten and intimidate Forest officers to provide access to forests to levers to extract resources by “local thugs”. Police is reportedly bribed by the same not to arrest them.

Civil society is relatively strong and organized in Modhupur: printed media, BELA, the “Law Center”, and Transparency International Bangladesh’s local office are exerting pressure on the Forest Department, with some results.

### Governance findings

Prior governance issue was characterized by a lack of appropriate coordination between by Forest Department and forest-dependent people on forest management that has historically resulted in conflicts, excessive number of forest litigations and a continuous ”tug of war”. However improvements have been noted recently. While 4 years ago there was not concrete effort to combat corruption, social institutions have been developed. Through the Community Forest Workers project and CREL (formerly IPAC), which spans on 7,000 (or 9000?) acres in Modhupur, forest dependent people have been made aware of the value to them and future generations of forest ecosystem, consequences of deforestation, as well as providing with incentives and alternative livelihoods to deter them from engaging in illegal logging activities. Better relationships have been developed with the Forest Department, and communications and trust seem to have improved.

##### Successes and failures of existing programme

The Community Forest Worker programme is seen as an overall success. The selection of participants (400 or 700 total) was based on the individuals with the most cases of illegal logging (or complicity in) filed against them. Those cases are currently not withdrawn but on hold for the time being.

Perceptions are more contrasted regarding the social forestry programme. When allocating land to people in social forestry programme, FD officials reportedly took bribes (5000 tk) per plot to hand over plots; were pressured by members of parliament and other political leaders such as Upujella[[2]](#footnote-2) chairmen.

**Access to information**

A number of stakeholders remarked on the difficulty to access information held by the Forest Department and therefore undertake adequate planning and monitoring. Demands for information included :

* afforestation and reforestation plans, budgets and number of community people to be involved, to help with community planning;
* 5 year development plan of the FD;
* revenues that the FD extracts for auctions of seized illegal timber, legal permits sold for collection of non-timber forest products;
* If there is a plan to allocate plots (as in social forestry programmes), what are the criteria to select participants – ample notification ahead of time would allow c ommunities to organize and protest if the criteria are deemed unfair or unclear

**Complaints mechanisms and criminal proceedings**

With regards to lodging complaints, a number of paths are used by civil society: turning to political leaders is one of the most used method; reporting to Forest officials, following the chain of command, is another.

On the other hand, the Forest Department frequently uses its power to instigate criminal proceedings. Yet this process is marked with flaws: cases are filed but rarely followed up upon; courts are not easily accessible and proceedings are long; and many instances of fake cases filed for personal reasons were reported.

### Recommendations

Based on the above, options to consider for REDD+ are as follow:

* Consider linking the Community Forest Worker programme to REDD+ incentives
* When designing a benefit selection and sharing system for REDD+, consider whether the selection criteria for the Social Forestry programme (engaging the poorest and most vulnerable), or those used for selecting CFW participants (engaging the “worst offenders”) are applicable to REDD+.
* Establish a more centralized, independent and systematic complaints mechanism accessible to forest-dependent communities on individuals
* Political commitment from elected officials, whether or not there is a change in the upcoming elections, will be key to sustain the observed improvement. Keeping an eye on powers influencing FD officials will also be important

## 4.2 Sreemongol

### Context

##### Perceptions of the trends in deforestation and forest degradation

According to several accounts, while degradation remains high, its rate of forest degradation has slowed in the last few years, which was linked by some to the arrival of new FD officials and a stronger commitment of the ruling party.

##### Actors

The Forest Department in Sreemongol was characterized by virtually all consulted stakeholders as lacking in manpower, tools and equipment (including guns to protect against armed illegal loggers), and training. Opinions however widely differ about the adequacy of their salaries.

Unlike the Garos in Modhupur, Sreemongol villagers have less of cultural attachment to forests, and have been instead described as “trying to harvest as much resources as possible”. Co-management of forests have increased in the past few years, notably through community patrolling groups.

Illegal loggers are at times armed.

### Governance findings

##### Accessing information about FD activities remains difficult

The Forest Department is widely characterized as providing little information proactively, and even having difficulties to provide information when requested, although this is mandated by the Right to Information Act. Interviews and FGDs revealed that demand exists for information related to the number and status of cases filed by the FD; the volumes of seized timber; and the FD Annual Development Plans.

##### Learning from experiences of benefit sharing in Social Forestry

As in Sreemongol, the selection criteria of participants for Social Forestry are clear and should not provide space for interpretation: they favor landless people (less than a given acreage), ethnic communities, disadvantaged people and poor forest villagers, poor families of freedom fighters. Yet abuses have been known to occur: political pressure to select unqualified people as participants, long delays to obtain approval from authorities, bribes extorted by Forest officials to select participants. Some examples of consultations to validate the selection of participants have been organized by NGOs, but are the exception.

##### Illegal logging and seized timber

Reports have been made of the Forest Department officials mandating workers to illegally fell trees, transport them to another area to then be seized and auctioned off. Volumes of auctioned timbers are also repeatedly under-reported, the proceeds from the informal sales then benefiting forest officials directly.

**Complaints mechanisms and criminal proceedings**

To lodge complaints, a number of paths are used: turning to political leaders is one of the most used method; reporting to Forest officials is another. While the media plays a role in independently reporting on forest crimes, this has led to very few changes. Community management committees provide a platform for complaints, but are rarely followed by punitive action against Forest officials.

Here also the Forest Department actively uses criminal proceedings (under the Forest Act or the Penal Code), although records of the number of cases are deemed very difficult to obtain. Instances of files deliberately missing information or containing inaccurate information have been reported to dismiss charges against connected individuals. When cases are tried, the judicial system is considered independent.

### Recommendations

Based on the above, options to consider for REDD+ are as follow:

* Raise awareness about values of forests (local climate patterns, etc) among forest-dependent communities so that reported corruption cases leading to deforestation and degradation resonate. Considering the influence of political leaders and elites in extracting forest resources, ensure political commitment to forest conservation.
* ***Consider incentives for performance***: Conduct trainings for forest officials on values, codes of conduct and accountability. In addition, establish a clear and verifiable system to monetarily reward integrity of FD officers (integrity performance) as a supplemental source of income[[3]](#footnote-3). For example, an annual bonus or award could be linked to conservation specific delineated areas that each FD guard/ beat ranger or higher would be responsible for. This performance would be based on annual tree inventories backed by photo evidence. Eventually these bonuses could be funded by REDD+ payments. Community patrolling groups could be incentivized in a similar manner.
* ***Establish better access to information*** : FD to make accessible, in a timely and proactive manner, information related to :
  + Annual plans and budgets
  + volumes and species of seized illegal logs
  + number of cases filed against community members and the proceedings of these cases
* Consider independent monitoring of declared volumes of auctioned timber/actual felling
* ***Build a solid, semi autonomous and complaints mechanism*** : Ensure that there is proper follow-up of grievances raised in monthly CMC meetings, and document and monitor this follow-up
* When selecting beneficiaries for REDD+ benefits, and learning from the Social Forestry programme, the FD should ensure transparency and participation. A few examples of selecting participants based on existing criteria to which additional consultations were added has prevented gross abuses in the selection process (such as beneficiaries not fufilling any of the listed criteria).

# Annex 1 : KII Guiding Questionnaire

(30 min to an hour)

Introduction; Study on integrity risks and opportunities in REDD+ mandated by the Forest Department; confidentiality

1. What is the observed general trend in deforestation and forest degradation in your area
2. What is your opinion on how governance affect deforestation and forest degradation?
3. What is your general opinion of forest governance in your region?

>if KII mentions corruption, ask follow up questions on what/who/at which point in the process/how/where; very detailed)

> if KII does not mention corruption specifically, ask them more specific questions about abuse of power (by anyone: timber traders, FD, police, committee member.. anyone who has power)

1. What are good experiences in improving integrity in the forest sector?
2. how do you provide (or **access information**) about forestry programmes ? Do you think it is adequate? What information would you like to access?
3. What are known **grievance and accountability** (feedback) mechanisms?
4. What additional recommendations may you have ?

**Annex 2 : list of KII per region**

1. Contact information: Alamgir.hossain@undp.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Local government unit under a district [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. More research needed here on practical, positive examples and best practices of integrity-related bonuse, awards and other incentives [↑](#footnote-ref-3)