

Chapter Two

Inauguration of the Workshop

The three-day national seminar on "Hill Districts of Bangladesh: Experiences in Development," jointly organised by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the Chittagong Hill Tracts' Development Board (CHTDB), and the Special Affairs' Division (SAD) of the Prime Minister's Office began in the hill resort town of Rangamati, Chittagong, on 23rd January 1995.

Amidst a distinguished gathering of local as well as foreign experts and participants, the seminar was formally inaugurated by the former minister for planning, Dr. Fasih Uddin Mahtab, and presided over by Dr. Fazlul Hassan Yusuf, Secretary of the Special Affairs' Division at the Parijatan Corporation Auditorium. The welcome address during the inaugural session was delivered by Major General Azizur Rahman, Chairperson of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' Development Board. This was followed by addresses from Mr. Egbert Pelinck, Director General of ICIMOD, Dr. Fazlul Hassan Yusuf, and the Chief Guest, Dr. Fasih Uddin Mahtab.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, with their distinct characteristics, have remained untapped, despite the tremendous potentials of human and natural resources. The seminar was organised with the aim of devising appropriate strategies for the development of the CHT, using local resources and keeping in mind its socioeconomic conditions and unique environment.

Dr. Fasih Uddin Mahtab, in his address, stated that 12 per cent of the total area of Bangladesh was hilly terrain with over one million inhabitants. Therefore, he added, the development of the CHT is crucial to the country as a whole and calls for the special attention of the government. He stressed the need for developing infrastructural facilities in the CHT, including education, roads, health facilities, irrigation, power, and so on.

He suggested the development of social forestry, horticulture, and collaborative farming in the CHT in order to bring together the scattered hilly people. Under this scheme, he said, people could be allotted 20 to 25 acres of hilly land on which to raise forests, rubber plantations, and plantations of other valuable trees that would improve the economic conditions of the poorer sections of people in the hills. He further suggested that handloom, textile, and various cottage industries could be established in the CHT to generate employment for the poor tribals. He called for greater allocation of funds for the socioeconomic development of the CHT and a greater involvement of the tribal people in such activities.

Mr. Egbert Pelinck, Director General of ICIMOD, after giving a brief introduction to the Centre, stated that farming is the main source of livelihood for the people of the Chittagong Hills. The forests and the waters of the CHT, he said, are important, natural resources for the nation and the local people, and infrastructure and enterprise development are needed to diversify the economy of the region and reverse the environmental degradation that is taking place.

He called for international, regional, and national support to give the development of mountain areas a meaningful direction. He pointed out that ICIMOD, during the past 11 years, has been knocking on the doors of policy-makers to sensitise them to the key problems and opportunities in different mountain and hill areas of the HKH Region and to identify approaches that could be followed, based upon lessons learned from their development experiences. He expressed confidence that the workshop, for which a large number of different development agencies and professionals had come together into one forum, would emerge with something very useful for the people of the CHT and their environment.

Dr. Fazlul Hassan dwelt on various aspects of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, including its demography, education, culture, economic condition of the tribals, and development strategies and programmes. He stated that the CHT covers 13,100sq.km. of area divided into the three districts of Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. Based on the 1991 Census, there were about 500,000 tribals among the 986,000 people inhabiting the CHT and the present government was carrying the legacy of the past socioeconomic backwardness of the Hill Tracts.

Stating that 40 per cent of the CHT land is covered by the Kaptai Lake, he stressed the need for better irrigation systems for the expansion of agriculture. Recognising the need to formulate strategies for the overall development of the CHT and to improve the living conditions of the people living therein, he appealed for the cooperation of all concerned in implementing government development programmes in the CHT area.

All speakers at the inaugural session stressed the need for international assistance and increased local investment for the development of human resources and infrastructure in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The three-day workshop was attended by over 45 participants representing planning, research, and development institutions working for this area. Fifteen papers, commissioned with the assistance of the Mountain Farming Systems' division of ICIMOD, on key issues of importance to the region, were presented by experts in the respective fields. The presence of the Secretary, Planning Division, Secretary, Ministry of Forests and Environment, and Secretary, Special Affairs' Division of the Government of Bangladesh enriched the practical utility of the workshop in terms of selecting priority areas for follow-up action.