

## BACKGROUND

The Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD), a well-known network of more than 200 civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangladesh, together with the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, organized a regional forum entitled Land and Water Governance in Asia: Resource Sharing and Cooperation on 29-30 November 2018, at the BRAC Centre Inn in Dhaka.

This gathering provided an overview of the current status and emerging issues on land and water governance in Asia, uncovering the factors that contribute to either the responsiveness or ineffectiveness of governance measures. Through the discussions, valuable learnings and recommendations to address the issues raised were identified.

A report from a two-day field visit to Cox's Bazar was also shared during a media briefing conducted on the first day of the forum. The report entitled, "Rohingya Refugee Situation and Its Effects on Local Host Communities: A Civil Society Report on the Field Visit in Ukhiya, Bangladesh" contains findings gathered by a five-member CSO delegation on the socio-economic impacts of the Rakhine crisis from the perspective of the host communities. Recommendations for governments and calls to action for the international community are likewise included in the release.



The forum brought together 65 (39 men and 26 women) civil society representatives, government officials, land rights activists, media professionals, experts, and academics, from across Bangladesh, as well as from South and Southeast Asia. By the end of the forum, participants signed the Dhaka Declaration on Land and Water Governance in Asia, solidifying commitment among CSOs to pursue and monitor reforms on land and water resource governance.

## The Issues in Brief

### Landless and Smallholder Farmers<sup>1</sup>

It is estimated that around 75 percent of the world's farming households live in Asia. Among them, 80 percent households are involved in small-scale farming; and this figure varies from country to country. The general trend indicates that most of these rural small-scale family farmer do not have their own land or have to live with very small plots of land, thus leading to hunger and poverty. Countries' macro and micro economic policies and land governance systems hardly favor these small producers. Moreover, on many occasions, the poorest of the poor – the landless, small-scale marginal farmers, and tenants, adivasis or indigenous peoples, and minority castes – are dispossessed from their own land to make way for industrial or commercial projects.

### Trans-boundary Water Conflicts

Rural communities depend largely on bodies of water for their lives and livelihood. They are vital for human consumption, irrigation and fisheries, transportation, and conservation of biodiversity. For water bodies with shared boundaries however, conflicts have either erupted or are brewing, owing to the unilateral distribution, use, and management of these resources by individual countries. This situation has been exacerbating political, social, and economic tensions in the region. In order to maintain GDP growth, the nations of the regions are also using water for hydropower and industrial purposes. Coupled with inefficient water management, the situation has resulted to the worsening of water pollution, which in turn poses serious threats to human health.

### Women in Agriculture

In developing countries, women are significantly contributing in the agricultural workforce, but they hardly have secure land tenure and property rights. Over the last one and half decades, women's participation in agriculture has increased



significantly for various reasons, such as rural out migration of the male counterpart to the city and abroad, or men's seasonal migration to engage in non-farming activities. In rural settings, women are actively engaged in post- as well as pre-harvesting agricultural work that men used to do. However, women's contribution in agriculture sector in many

countries of Asia has not been recognized formally. Due to women's non-recognition as farmers, they are deprived of their right to access government subsidies and credit from public finance institutions. Wage discrimination is also widely practiced. Moreover, women in rural areas rarely have direct access to markets for their

<sup>1</sup>Small-Scale family farmers

produce. This unequal access to opportunities and services has been contributing to the widening gender gap that not only has adverse socio-economic impacts on women, but also on food security for their families and communities.

### **Indigenous Peoples**

Around two thirds of the world's indigenous peoples live in Asia. Their relationships to ancestral lands are the source of their cultural, spiritual, and social identity. However, their rights to lands, territories, and resources are at the heart of indigenous peoples' struggles around the world. Indigenous peoples across the region are facing multiple forms of discrimination and are being forced to vacate their traditional territories to allow for public and private business operations. They are also being caught in the crossfire of armed groups. Indigenous leaders and environmental activists are being killed for opposing projects that impinge on indigenous land rights. For indigenous women and girls, the burden is doubled, as land conflicts make them more susceptible to gender-based violence such as rape. In some cases, State agencies are accused of employing violent tactics to drive indigenous peoples away. Yet with the prevailing culture of impunity, perpetrators have continued their oppression of indigenous people.

### **Rohingya Refugee Crisis**

It is estimated that more than 1 million Rohingya refugees from the Rakhine state of Myanmar have fled to Cox's Bazar, to escape the killings, torture, arson, and sexual violence by security forces in Burma. This sudden influx of people has put immense pressure on resources such as land, forests, and water. A joint study on Environmental Impact of Rohingya Influx, conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women, reported that a total of 4,300 acres (1,740 hectares) of hills and forests have been cut down to make temporary shelters, facilities, and cooking fuel in Ukhia and Teknaf of Cox's Bazar. Around 3,000 to 4,000 acres (1,200–1,600 hectares) of hilly lands in the Teknaf-Ukhia-Himchari watershed area have been cleared of vegetation. The report cited that each Rohingya family uses an average of 60 culms of bamboo to construct temporary shelters, and that nearly 6,800 tonnes of fuel-wood are collected each month. The crisis has also affected the everyday lives of local communities near and around the camp sites, with locals expressing that they feel marginalized within their own community, and that they even have to compete with the refugees for local employment.

