

# **AGRICULTURAL BIODIVERSITY AND THE LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES OF THE VERY POOR IN RURAL BANGLADESH**

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The fact that the poor people are dependent on uncultivated foods for their survival and livelihoods is well known in the villages of rural Bangladesh. But what is the nature of this dependence? Our study explores the use by the very poor of the food and plants they collect from the lands, water bodies and forests where they live. When we asked villagers “where are the poor”, the answer was “chak”, meaning in the cultivated fields of others or out on the roadsides. From the months of Bhadra to Kartik they are busy in the sugarcane fields harvesting for farmers. In the months of Agarhayan, Poush and Magh they are busy harvesting potatoes and preparing seedlings for the paddy fields of farmers. They may receive some money for this labor, which they will use to buy oil, salt, school expenses and debt repayment. But they will also take potatoes as partial payment and collect the straw which is no longer needed to cover the ground in the potato field and bring it home for fuel. They will pick the jute leaves in the farmers’ field for food and collect the uncultivated leafy greens along the side of the rice field, some of which they will sell. They will sell eggs from their free-range chickens to buy rice and collect small fish in the water bodies for the daily meal. This is their livelihood. What is an appropriate response to the challenges of ensuring their access to these food sources? Agricultural development targeted on a few crops cannot adequately compensate the very poor for the losses in access to uncultivated food sources caused by farming practices such as the extensive use of pesticides and monocropping. Neither can they compensate for the erosion of the common property regimes and social rules that enable people to use these food sources. Analysis of the contributions of uncultivated foods to food security in Bangladesh suggests that the appropriate level for enhancing access to these food sources is the community landscape, not the individual plant species, farm or backyard. Simply by promoting biodiversity-based farming systems and protecting village lands from pesticides and enclosure of common lands, an enormous resource in uncultivated foods is also ensured. Such a strategy can be called “cultivating the landscape”, in contrast to more limited definitions of agriculture based on cultivated plants in cultivated fields. Improvements to agriculture should consequently be pursued in the context of a broader strategy to enhance the capacity of communities to create and maintain the conditions needed for biodiverse food systems. Ultimately, biodiversity is NOT cultivated, but rather nurtured in biodiverse agro-ecosystems.