



**NOTE ON THE ROLE OF TEA ESTATES AND TEA ESTATE LABORERS
IN RELATION TO NISHORGO SUPPORT PROJECT CO-MANAGEMENT
OBJECTIVES**

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Prepared for

International Resource Group

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Three members of the Nishorgo Support Project team held a meeting with a senior manager of one of the largest tea estates in the Srimongal Division. This note represents information gleaned from that meeting, held in December, 2004.

All the three PAs in Sylhet forest division are surrounded by tea estates. There are 4 tea estates bordering Lawachara National Park and 1 estate bordering Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary. There are one or two bordering the western side of the Satchuri National Park (proposed).

A large number of tea estate workers and their family members (nearly 2500-3000 work force in an average tea estate) depend on adjoining forests for meeting their needs for fuel wood and timber. Sometimes the unemployed villagers (on an average 20% of available male work force remains unemployed) are involved in illicit felling for fuel wood and timber both from the nearby forests and tea estates (e.g. shade trees planted in tea gardens). This means that joint efforts from both FD and tea estate authorities may be helpful in controlling illicit felling of trees.

Tea estate owners are particularly interested to find income generation activities for the unemployed men that are involved in illicit felling of shade trees on their estates. The felling occurs typically in a joint relationship between the unemployed men on the estate and the wood dealers from outside the estate. Typically, the estate laborers will lead in the wood cutters during the night, guiding them along the ways of the estate, so that the cutters can do their work.

At times, these men from the estates may also take wood from the nearby forests and protected areas. The tea estate manager with whom we spoke made it clear that the tea estates have little to gain from conservation of the PAs. On the contrary, managers would be very content if the estate laborers took their illegal wood from the PAs, just so long as they do not take it from their own tea estates.

It appears that there may be a seasonal dimension to the illegal felling to which unemployed men on the estates contribute. Since their employment levels tend to be higher during the harvesting season (June through December), the amount of illegal felling in this period (both inside and outside the estates) is presumed to be lower. Efforts to stop the illegal felling of these men should perhaps be focused around the times of the year (Jan to June) when they have few other employment or income generation opportunities.

This group of men on the estates appears to be a sort of permanent and intentionally maintained underclass. They are not given good schools. Their families are given employment opportunities that ensure some income, but they have little reason for hope or optimism for a brighter future for themselves. As evidence, our information indicated that only 2 men in the past twenty years had gone to university from the tea estates. If the mental framework and social context for these men is as bleak as our brief interview suggests, then the NSP will have little success in promoting AIGs to this group.

It may be necessary rather to work with one group of stakeholders to ensure that this group -- the unemployed men who illegally fell trees in PAs -- are stopped or legally punished for their acts.

If collaborative work is to be done with the estates, however, the NSP will need to work through the Association. There are 161 tea estates in the country and Bangladesh Tea Association (with HQs at Chittagong) coordinates their activities. Tea Labor Association is responsible for the welfare of the laborers of all the Tea Estates, whereas each Tea Estate has a Panchayat, which looks after the affairs of tea workers locally.

It is clear that little progress can be made in doing any dialogue or interaction with tea estates in the absence of a green light from the Tea Association. Mr. Wahidul Haque, Chairman, Bangladesh Tea Association (Agrabad, Chittagong) is the person that must be met if such a green light is to be obtained. It is unlikely that such an approval would come if the request were made by the FD, in light of a significant degree of institutional differences between the two organizations. Rather, the Association may initially be addressed by the Project itself, via its TA team. Mr. Haque is the manager of an estate near Satchuri NP, and can be contacted there.

To the extent that possible activities with estates can be undertaken, possible activities may include the following:

- (i) Co-opting a managerial level officer from Tea Association as member of proposed co-management committee
- (ii) Creating conservation awareness among villagers of adjoining tea estates
- (iii) Organizing groups of tea workers for income generation activities and forest protection duties, and
- (iv) If possible, forming FD-Tea Estate coordination committee.