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## **Churia Conservation: Efforts and Challenges in Nepal**

The Churia range (also called Siwaliks) rises steeply from the Terai plains and extends as a contiguous landscape from east to west. It is bordered by the Mahabharat range in the north and by the Terai in the south. The Churia is young and composed of unconsolidated loose materials originated from soft rocks such as mudstone, sandstone, silt stone and shale. Soils are mostly formed on sedimentary rocks with shallow and coarse textured soils. Steep slopes and weakly consolidation of different layers is prone to severe surface erosion. It is stretched in 36 districts of the country, and incorporates about 12.76% of the total area, where more than 15% of the total population of the country reside.

Despite with nearly 72.37% of the Churia under forest cover and rich in biodiversity, it is alarming and considered vulnerable to natural disasters such as landslides, erosions, flood and climate change impacts. Vulnerability of fragile ecosystem is further aggravated by numerous anthropogenic interventions such as settlement through encroachment, clearing of forests for cultivation, over exploitation of timber and other forest products through illegal logging, uncontrolled grazing, excavation and extraction of sand and gravel thereby rapidly changing the face of the region. It can be seen that around 6.5 million cubic metre of gravel, stone and sand are legally extracted every year from the region and the illegal extractions are expected to be twice as much. In addition, the water flowing from the Churia range usually brings an immense amount of debris and deposits them in the main river channels downstream. These deposited debris reduce the carrying capacity of the rivers, which causes riverbed rising, river bank cutting, flashfloods and desertification of agricultural lands, siltation of reservoirs and barrages, and breaching of roads and bridges usually causes loss of life and properties in Churia as well as downstream Terai.

Recent researches observed that rivers from Churia range have widened and shifted from their original course to a greater extent such as in the Koshi, Balan, Ratu, Lakhandehi, Bangeri Dudhaura and Mohana. There are many government, non-governmental and international organizations involved in Churia conservation namely Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) Project and Western Terai Landscape Complex Project (WTLCP), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) of Germany, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE)-Nepal and Department

For International Development (DFID). However, no desired objectives of soil and water conservation and natural resources management could yet be achieved because of their individualistic approach. The Government of Nepal (GoN) has promulgated necessary acts and regulations, strategies and plans in which an urgent need of Churia conservation is placed on the highest priority. In this regard, the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MoFSC) has been working on “President Chure Conservation Programme” since 2011. More than three years after its launch, the ‘iconic’ President Chure Conservation Programme became unable to address the issues to protect the fast denuding Chure and the inner Terai range. The MoFSC is leading and implementing this programme in 27 districts through its two departments namely Department of Forests and Department of Soil Conservation and Watershed Management. The lack of commitment from the political parties and their local representatives, lack of adequate support from the bureaucratic level and lack of performance-based analysis of the current status of the region are some challenges in the implementation aspect of the programme. Having realized such intricacy in addressing the challenges in Churia conservation, the GoN has recently established the President Chure Terai Madesh Conservation Committee under the Development Committee Act, 2013 to address the issues in integrated approach.

Environmental degradation in the Churia region is not only limited in the upstream areas rather it has created more severe disasters in the downstream areas of the Terai region as well. A good understanding and interaction between the people of upstream and downstream must be established to have the conservation and mitigation activities implemented. These might be achieved by forming community organizations and networking in the river system. Integrated watershed management could be optimal option to address the aforementioned issues through identified conservation activities implemented effectively and strong coordination among all the concerned stakeholders. Baseline survey of both the socio-economic and bio-physical situation need to be known before any conservation and development activities start in the region. The research, survey and study programmes are equally important in this regard since, in one hand, they provide references for monitoring, supervision and evaluation of the programme implementation while, on the other hand, they justify the priorities, significance and urgency of the conservation activities in a scientific way.