

DOWN TO EARTH
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Shillong meet declares shifting cultivation environment-friendly

LINDA CHHAUCHHUAK *Shillong*

So the so-called 'primitive' hill farmers were right after all. At the Regional Shifting Cultivation Policy Dialogue Workshop for Eastern Himalayas, held October 8-10, 2004 in Shillong, Jhum (shifting) cultivation was pronounced "good for the environment, livelihoods, biodiversity conservation and food and social security." Hill farmers knew this all along. Struggling under misconceived policies that pronounced them perpetrators of the worst kind of environmental degradation in the hills, for them it was sweet music to hear international experts and government officials agreeing that *jhum* was the "best possible practice" for mountainous regions of the world.

The workshop ended with a resolution termed the Shillong Declaration. It urges governments and policymakers to recognise *jhums* immense utility and so shift policy from its current emphasis on "weaning away" hill farmers from a "primitive" style of cultivation. Policy could now turn supportive, the declaration argued, also demanding that the tenurial rights of *jhum* cultivators be recognised.

The meet was the culmination of three years of work to document "Good Practices of Farmers' Innovations in

Shifting Cultivation", which began in 2002 in Shillong at a workshop designed by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and its partners in India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal. The initiative was supported by the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and the North Eastern Council (NEC; the Centre's nodal agency through which money for development-related works in the northeast is channelled). 30 researchers

and farmers from these countries were brought together to focus on 20 case studies covering farmers' innovations and adaptations, long marginalised by tough terrain but also mis-perception. According to ICIMOD, case studies provided ample examples of good practices in terms of farming, forestry, soil and water conservation and biodiversity management. Farmers were cultivating a variety of commercial and home-consumed crops and products, it emerged. What also emerged was that current

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What the Shillong Declaration says

- **Jhum (shifting) cultivators conserve forests and make it productive at the same time.** Said researcher Drupad Choudhury of the G B Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, "*Jhumias nurse and nurture forests back into their *jhum* fields, while conventional farmers banish the forest from their fields*". He felt it was also a way of forest management at the landscape level. V T Darlong, senior scientist at the Union ministry of environment and forests, forcefully argued that "the basic philosophy of shifting cultivation has been to create forests and not to destroy forests, for without forests the next *jhum* cannot be cultivated."
- **Jhum cultivation conserves biodiversity**
- **Jhum cultivation systems are a storehouse of innovative organic farming practices and crop species of commercial value, such as the method of pollarding alders in Khonoma, Nagaland, a innovated tree management system**
- **Jhum cultivation supports the continuity of social institutions in hill societies, as also traditional institutions, customs and tenure systems.**

